

the second unit report

by Kris Paterson

So who ever heard about the *second unit*, except perhaps for a handful of stoic movie fans who actually have the temerity to watch the credits despite an audience that tramples all over them during the nightly stampede for the exits.

Well, theoretically, the second unit picks up all the boring shots, the inserts, and trivia that would be too expensive for the full crew to shoot. In reality, the second unit is often more interesting, less uptight, and certainly more fun.

Shooting **Fish Hawk** was definitely an interesting experience, the cast consisting of grizzly bears, Russian boars, cougars, owls, ravens and assorted dogs and rabbits, all of which had distinct personalities and egos.

Working with animals is a completely different scene of the "hurry up and wait" variety. They decline to present their best profile on cue, don't understand standing on marks, and seldom remember which was a good take. All of the animals work on the reward system with food offered for a good performance, but herein lies a problem; a well fed bear tends to hibernate at this time of year which is not the performance desired.

The crew was minimal and everybody humped the gear, three Panavision Arri 2's and related hardware, and required much goffering, through the forest. To complicate matters, the trainer insisted that we make reassuring noises when approaching the animals. Humming Winnie-the-Pooh-style songs, while carrying an O'Connor head, tripod and magazine case, sometimes feels a little ludicrous.

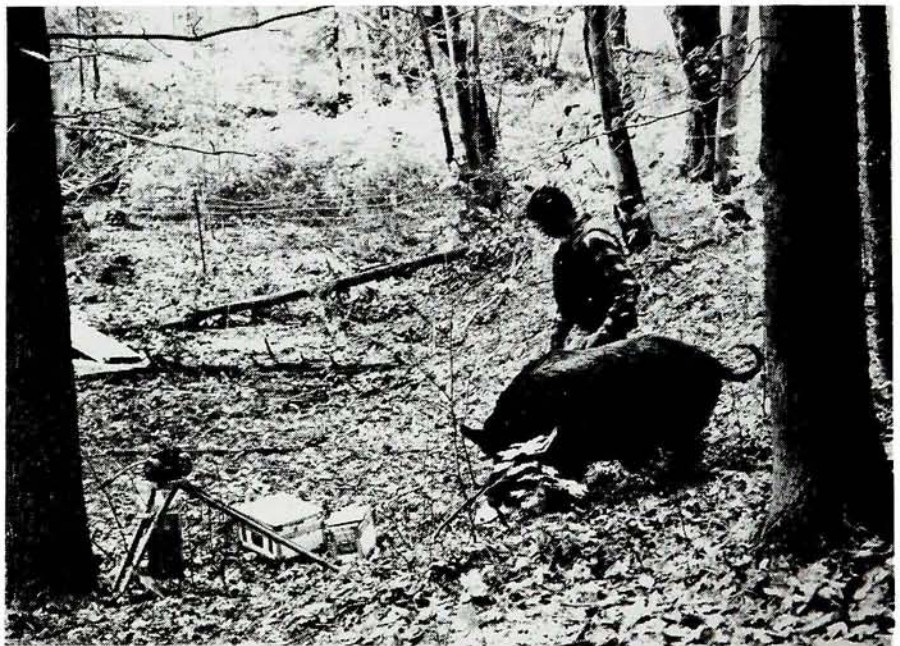
Filming rabbits and dogs is no great problem, but bears and boars are something else. They are large and unpredictable, short on temper and very fast. In order for us to shoot in close — sometimes only two or three feet away — we had the dubious protection of an electrified fence, known as the "hot line". This consists of two or

three thin strands of wire at waist height. We also had the verbal assurance that the animals understood the command "hot" and would stop... Let's hear it for B.F. Skinner.

The script called for a confrontation and fight scene between Grizz the Bear and Snort the Boar weighing in at 700 lbs. and 800 lbs. respectively. I casually asked Steve the trainer what might transpire, he allowed equally



The second unit, trying to fade into the scenery



The boar on his way to the tripod and gear as the trainer heads him off

casually that he didn't know for sure. I concentrated on the job of pulling focus, and tried not to think of the ramifications; a thousand pounds of wild meat, meeting for the first time.

The animals were in position, all three cameras rolling, when Grizz saw Snort for the first time as T.V. dinner on the hoof. Grizz roared... Snort squeaked... They met briefly. Snort went one way and Grizz went after him straight through the "Hot Line" without twitching. They both moved so fast it is surprising that any of the cameras caught a frame. The adrenalin rushing through the crew would have resurrected half of Toronto; and while the trainers got the animals under control, we all practiced a sort of Tai Chi, trying to look and feel like trees.

The rushes looked great and after this epic day (which wasn't repeated), second unit got down to the serious business of pigs feet, left or right, animals running over buried cameras, and occasional sunsets as called for by continuity. □