

## Airwolf North

S ometime last year, MCA Inc. found itself with a cancelled prime-time action/adventure series on its hands. It needed 24 more hour-long episodes to get the series into syndication on USA Network. The last 24 were to be shot at roughly 1/3 the budget of the originals (from \$1.2 million U.S. per hour to \$400,000). Jan-Michael Vincent, Ernest Borgnine, and a killer helicopter were the former stars. Only the chopper remained (along with stock action footage) A Los Angeles-based company, The Arthur Company, tried to put a deal together to produce it in the States, but labour problems caused it to collapse. MCA came to Canada for help.

In the fall of '86, Atlantis Films took over the production of the \$10 million project, which is code-named *Airwolf*. It is currently shooting in a converted distillery in North Vancouver.

I have to admit that I had a couple of prejudices against *Airwolf* when it came to town. Sure, it carried the Atlantis Films name, it had a 100% Canadian certified banner on it, and it was giving Canadians lots of work. But a U.S. style shoot 'em-up that starred a gun-laden helicopter didn't exactly top my list of sets I'd like to hang around on. So for several months, I hid behind highbrow remarks about the Canadian industry's role as a running dog for low-end American programming.

But after awhile *Airwolf* began to get a good name around town, especially from the people who were working on it. It seemed that "the comic book that moves" was giving work to lots of locals, and some interesting associations were being formed. Randy Bradshaw, a local director, helmed an episode - his first gig with Atlantis - which led to more work on Atlantis' *Ramona Q* series. And guys like Al Simmonds and Ken Jubenvill, who've worked with just about everyone in town already, were having fun enjoying the old home-week atmosphere, as well as getting to meet people from Alberta and as far away as Montreal. Simmonds said the series was his first chance to work with old pal DOP Ron Orioux, and Jubenvill felt it was a chance for oldtimers and newcomers alike to prove themselves to the Americans.

The former Park & Tilford distillery where *Airwolf* was underway was easy to find - the parking lot was full of jeeps. But the Atlantis producer, Jonathan Goodwill wasn't dressed in olive drabs and gold chains at all - he looked like a nice, Canadian soccer-player-type, who fit right in with my preconceived idea of 'The Atlantis Profile' (young, bright, but casual - the new breed of Canadian winner?) He explained that he had never worked with Atlantis before: "We're all about the same age, and have the same basic perspective on things, so it's nice to work with them." But isn't *Airwolf* a

bit of a change of pace for the darling of Canadian production companies? Goodwill agreed, but pointed out the obvious reason for getting involved. "It was a chance to establish a positive relationship with a U.S. major that hopefully will lead to bigger and better things." A \$10 million meat-and-potatoes production that comes off well could open doors. And like it or lump it, the U.S. majors are the centre of the action. The trust seemed to be there already - I noticed no bevy of hysterical MCA producers storming around. Goodwill said that the Americans held back and let the Canadians go for it. The only MCA producer was Steve Ecclesine, who had nothing but praise for the Canadian production.

The challenge of producing a good quality series on a shoestring budget had its difficulties, not the least of which was 12-hour shooting days, though Goodwill was pleased that 80% of the crew stayed for the duration. We went on a tour of the former distillery, where designers and set construction people transformed the studio and grounds into Paris, the steamy jungles of Burma, a pool hall in midwestern U.S., a bar in Afghanistan, etc. We chat with Ken Wells, who was putting the finishing touches on a series of gravestones for the following week's cocaine-smuggling episode. Part of a log cabin leaned against the far wall - Goodwill pointed out that it was salvaged from last spring's *Brother by Choice* shoot, and had been used several times for *Airwolf*.

When we returned, Jana Veverka, (who also has a co-producer credit) was back from lunch. Her office was on the bare side and she explained that she'd almost finished her *Airwolf* stint, and was slowly moving over to *Danger Bay*. I asked her what on earth she was doing on *Airwolf*. She burst out laughing. "It's a challenge! At first, I had terrible apprehensions - an action/adventure with

a helicopter is not my predilection. But the job offer came at the right time, and I thought it might be fun." Her first action was to arm up with a couple of issues of *Soldier of Fortune* and the *Airwolf* flight manual, studying such things like Uzis and I.R. jammers (automatic system that produces omnidirectional radiation of infrared energy to disable IR tracking). After looking over the 12 scripts that had come with the series she hired Rick Drew and Chris Haddock to write an act as story editors. Michael Mercer, Lyle and Barbara Brown, Bill Gough and Rob Carney made up the balance of the Canadian writing team.

Aside from learning 101 ways to describe a helicopter entering a scene, ("She swoops from the sky" "She spins over the horizon." "She shudders onto the tarmac.") the challenge for the writers was to find low-budget ways of creating suspense and action. "There was no money to blow up a lot of helicopters, so we had to turn to the traditional storytelling techniques. We approached it like any other series - through the characters and stories."

Mercer, who was written for U.S. series before as well as Canadian (*For the Record*, *Sidestreets*) commented that writing formulaic drama can be fun, "once you get over any pretensions to make a statement about humanity." On the four *Airwolf* scripts he wrote, he especially enjoyed creating the villains. "I'm a character writer and I love to create characters that would be unnatural in a Canadian naturalistic setting. And with the good guy of the series being this virtually unbeatable gunship, I wanted to create a villain who was big enough to create a real threat - otherwise you'd just feel sorry for him."

Lyle Brown, who with his wife Barbara wrote two *Airwolf* scripts, commented that although they lean toward family drama and documentaries, the fantasy

action/adventure genre is one they enjoy working on. "After the CBC series, *The Collaborators* and *Sidestreets* disappeared, there was virtually no opportunity to write action-oriented programs in Canada." In fact, after writing one episode, they began plotting ways to write a second. When they found a spooky overgrown garden on the Park & Tilford grounds, they were inspired to write a script about a deranged doctor and his deadly plant experiments. "We hoped that Atlantis would go for it when they got toward the end of their budget and would need a script that could be shot in the backyard. And they did!"

Veverka's pride in Canadian writers is emphatic. "It's not a matter of asking the American companies to please give Canadian writers a chance - we're as good as anybody. Our writers have credentials, and most have written more than their U.S. counterparts because it's a smaller pool up here. There's an opportunity here for writers to broaden our base, whereas the U.S. writers tend to get stereotyped and wind up only writing sitcoms or whatever."

Okay, but doesn't writing schlock ruin you for writing really serious, heartfelt Canadian drama? Lyle Brown's response was simple - the *Airwolf* job bought him time to work on a pet stage play, "which probably will never see the light of day."

The Canadian directors (Ken Jubenvill, Alan Simmonds, Bruce Pittman, Randy Bradshaw, Brad Turner, J. Barry, George Erschbamer, and Zale Dalen), were unanimous about the directorial challenge - the shooting schedule (5 days for a one-hour-long program) and the budget restrictions. According to Jubenvill, "We had a horrendous schedule, and had to create exotic locations we couldn't afford to go to with a helicopter we didn't have." All had praise for the designer Steve Geaghan and the locations and set construction people who took care of the latter, along with Canadian DOPs - Richard Leiterman, Ron Orioux and J. Barry Herron.

Steve Ecclesine, the MCA producer, believes that the good experience MCA had with the *Airwolf* shoot will bode well as far as future television production with Canada goes. "In light of the Canadian content requirements, we had no choice but to go with Canadian talent. It was a risk, but once in, we were very impressed. We were in the position of having to cut our budget into a third, but what could we do - we couldn't send letters to the audience to explain why the last 24 are going to look different. But we found that the quality was very good, and in some cases even better than the original."

The next day I'm driving up Cypress Bowl with a friend on a typical warm, Vancouver spring day, and encounter a roadblock. After the nice, clean-cut Canadian RCMP officer waves us through, he turns to his partner, "Hey did you see *Airwolf* last night? It was really neat...!" I smash my nose against the window shouting, "It's Canadian! I was there - they gave me an *Airwolf* flight manual!" Well, I can change my mind, can't I?

• Anthony Sherwood, Michelle Scarabelli, Geraint Wyn Davies - seated, Barry van Dyke

