

bear island

fighting the elements



Setting up while there's still some daylight left

$70 + 35 = 2450 + .02 = 49.00$

by Philip McPhedran

What was it like to crew the most expensive Canadian feature ever made? And to be thousands of miles from home? And to find the ice forming around your mouth and nose as you waited for something to happen? And when it happened, to find out it was not what you were expecting after all? Philip McPhedran put in time with the crew of *Bear Island*.



An icy Donald Sutherland

It's thirty-five degrees below centigrade in Stewart, B.C., and the cast and crew are huddled on the side of a glacier. Supposedly they are there to shoot an avalanche scene for **Bear Island**, a 9.3 million dollar Anglo-Canadian co-production.

But there's one slight problem. A small cloud has stopped on the peak of the mountain and refuses to move. After a five hour set-up, planting the dynamite, using helicopters to drop camera crews and their gear, using bombardiers and snowcats to get to other camera positions, and lining up the five cameras, the shot is called off and re-scheduled for another shooting day.

Unusual? Not on **Bear Island**. Fighting the elements, whether it be snow or wind, this production literally froze its way to completion.

Bear Island was put together by Canadian Peter Snell, who with early funding from the Canadian Film Development Corporation, united Selkirk Holdings of Toronto (\$3.0 mil), Toronto-Dominion Bank (\$1.8 mil), Bank of Montreal (\$1.2) and Columbia, U.K. (\$3.3), to shoot the highest-ever budget Canadian film.

There are certain conditions and allowances in the co-production agreement and **Bear Island** didn't seem to have any problem fulfilling any of them.

Starring Donald Sutherland, Vanessa Redgrave, Christopher Lee, Barbara Parkins, Lloyd Bridges and Richard Widmark, **Bear Island** brings together a well-known cast with a high adventure story written by Alistair MacLean (who has topped 60 million in world-wide sales with his novels).

Sutherland and Parkins represent Canada; Redgrave and Lee, the United Kingdom. Since under the agreement you are allowed two foreign artists, Snell picked up Bridges and Widmark from the United States.

You also can shoot in a third country, so the production spent a month in Glacier Bay, Alaska. The other locations were in Stewart, B.C. and Pinewood Studios in London.

Canadian actors playing major roles in the film include Lawrence Dane, Patricia Collins, Candace O'Connor, Augie Schellenberg and Nicholas Courtland.

Don Sharp, the veteran English director, had already worked with Snell when he directed **Hennessy** for him. Currently playing in London to excellent reviews, is his remake of

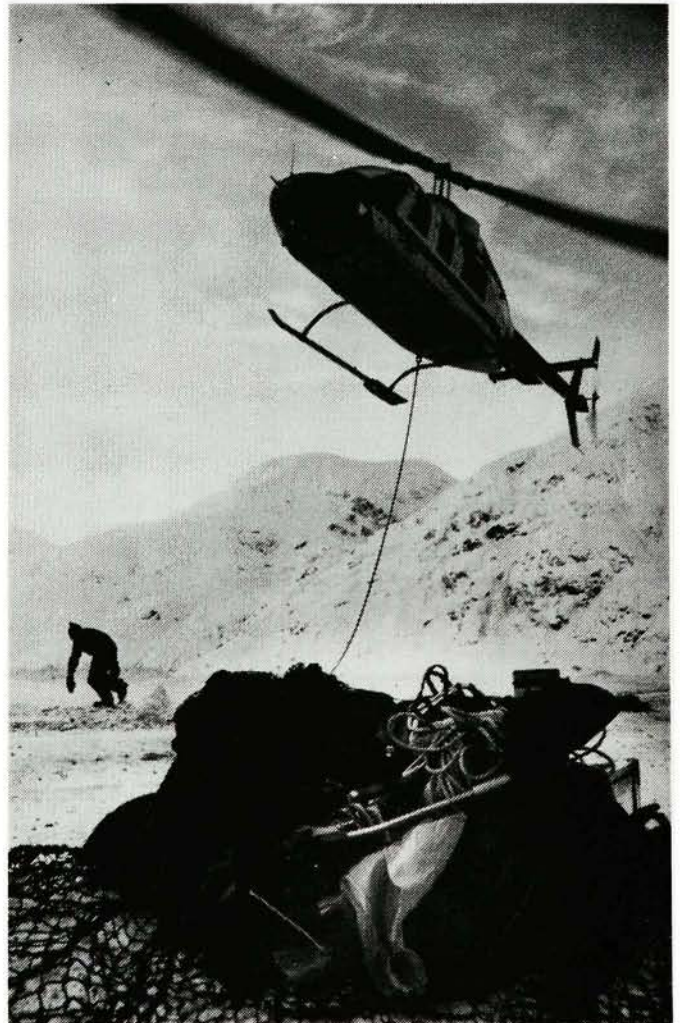
The 39 Steps. Sharp also brought you the stunning boat chase through the canals of Amsterdam in **Puppet on a Chain**.

Sharp, David Butler (**Voyage of the Damned**) and Murray Smith collaborated on the script. With MacLean's agreement, they changed the story from one about a film crew, to one about a NATO expedition plagued by strange occurrences while on a mission at Bear Island. Snell explained the change this way, "We liked the story line but felt another film about filmmakers would be boring. After all, **Day for Night** really was the definitive movie about filmmaking."

There had been a few doubts expressed about the capabilities of a Canadian crew after some earlier co-production fiascos, but **Bear Island** followed in the footsteps of **Coup d'Etat** (later renamed **Power Play** for all you hockey fans) proving that Canadians rank second to none in filmmaking expertise.

A lot of credit has to go to the west coast IATSE, who under the enlightened leadership of John Bartley showed once again that flexibility and common sense encourage a producer to come to them (unlike their brothers of the East but that's another story).

The original schedule called for 78 days of shooting, with just over a month being spent in Stewart, another month on the Russian cruise ship, the M.S. Lyubov Orlova in Glacier Bay, and finally a month of shooting in the studios at Pinewood. The film lost about five days in Stewart due to weather conditions, and another five for the same reason in Alaska, all



A helicopter giving the crew and gear a hoist

Philip McPhedran, one of the co-revivers of Cinema Canada, directed the C.B.C. Superspecial Karen Kain: Ballerina.

at an average daily cost of about \$80,000. So it seems the film will eventually come in at around 90 days.

The construction crew arrived mid-September in Stewart, a mining town whose population had dropped from 1200 to 500 earlier that year when Granduc Mines closed shop. **Bear Island** came at just the opportune time. Over the course of shooting, the production employed about 120 locals and poured about \$2 million dollars into the area.

In order to get to the exterior set, which was thirty-two miles from Stewart at Tide Lake (listed in the "Guinness Book of Records" as having had the largest snow accumulation over a winter, approximately 100 feet), the crew had to be bussed for an hour and a half over a very beautiful, but dangerous mining road. Included on the journey were two to three foot cliffs on one side of the very narrow road and a mile long tunnel carved through a mountain. It was just past this tunnel that a fuel tanker, caught in a whiteout, drove directly off a cliff, falling five hundred feet end over end. Fortunately, the driver found three hundred feet from the truck, came out of the crash with a concussion and a few cracked ribs. For sixteen miles of the road, the B.C. Highways supplied convoy leaders who led the production vehicles to the set, reporting in every mile about their progress. With twenty two vehicles, each equipped with radios for safety, and not all of them travelling in the same convoy, organization became very important. Teamsters and locals split the driving between them (the locals with ten years experience on the road taught the teamsters before shooting) and to them it became a common sight when helicopters landed on the road in front of them to offload gear or lunch for main or second unit. The road was kept open twenty-four hours a day by snow control personnel, called Snowbirds. Their leader Robin Mounsey from Stewart, estimated there were sixty possible snow slide paths on the road and that fifteen to twenty of them were quite possibly major in nature. Using 75mm recoilless rifles (fairly big) they would fire twenty pound shells from the road into cornices (overhangs) in order to cause a smaller avalanche than if they let it build up. When they couldn't reach the cornices from the road, one of the Snowbirds would hang by harness from a helicopter (minimum two men on the safety line) and lob a bundle of dynamite, after lighting the fuse, into the cornice. Then the idea was to get the helicopter out of there very quickly.

The first day of shooting gave the production an idea of what to expect — they went to the cover set right away. Then in the second week of shooting, a very unnatural thaw occurred, costing them a couple of days. And finally, a huge overnight snowfall of four feet combining with high winds, closed the road to the set for a couple of days.

Stuart, the first assistant director, faced four options on the morning of a shoot. Depending on weather and road conditions, he had to decide on one of the following: either try and go to Tide Lake for the exterior set, or in the opposite direction to Bear Glacier, or to the Meziadin Highway (another direction) for rig shots (shooting actors from the waist up on the back of a flat bed truck as if they were skiing on snow), or if all else failed to the cover set two miles away from Stewart. Of course, whatever decision he did make affected almost every department.

His assistants didn't have it any easier. Apart from being frozen on a glacier every day, at night they had to make the circuit around Stewart to the crew and cast delivering on average about one hundred and twenty-five call sheets.



A hydrocopter on a scouting mission

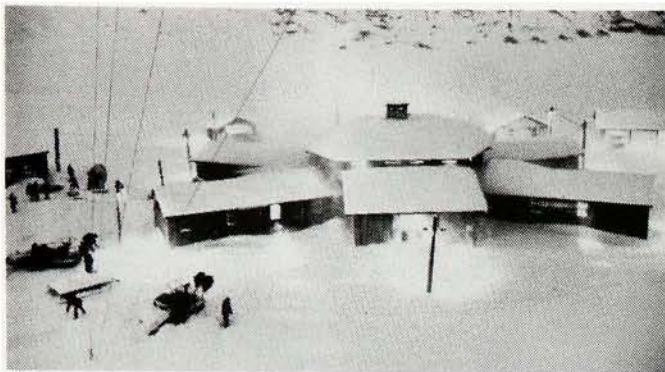
Just the mammoth size of the production created problems. At one location, the crew was shooting on a lake situated two miles from the road. Using a helicopter, with gear wrapped in a sling underneath, they brought in heavy equipment, but most had to be brought in on a sled attached to a Bombardier. The helicopter made at least seven return trips bringing in such diverse gear as Hydrocopters (built in Sweden for this terrain but rather ineffectual on Canadian snow), Larvens (like a snow-mobile but the rider wears ski) and finally on its last trip, lunch for the crew. Because of the height of the mountains, the production could only shoot for six hours a day, and in situations like these three to four hours could be used up just getting everybody and everything there. At this particular location, the temperature with wind chill factor dropped to 55 below.

Most of these exterior scenes were not two actors with dialogue. In this section, here are just a few of the special effects and stunts that were done: blow up a Hydrocopter and in the same shot have two stunt men thrown back in the air by the force of the explosion (using nitrogen jet ramps at 1300psi pressure), do a long chase scene ending in a crash between two Hydrocopters and two Larvens; film an avalanche scene with five cameras, and for a break in the monotony, topple a radio mast onto a building and blow up a generator hut. Yes, sometimes they did do some straight dialogue scenes.

To facilitate shooting, two cameras were generally used, with two others and the second-unit camera available for special effect and stunt scenes. Only 300,000 feet of film was budgeted for the production.

With a Panaflex, a PSR, and two pan arris, the assistants were kept quite busy. They had five different ways to heat the cameras. Basically they started with the built-in heaters (not in the pan arris), then used heating blankets, pocket heaters for the lenses, plate heaters, and finally, wire heaters two to seven feet long. All the camera gear was stored overnight in a room with all the windows open to prevent condensation which would cause fogging, but even then they had to cope with twenty degree transitions once they got on location. Problems usually occurred when the lenses were warmer than the camera body or vice versa. Then one or the other had to be cooled to the same temperature.

The cameras were run off alternating current most of the time, which might seem surprising considering the locations, but made a lot of sense since the batteries, despite being kept



Bunking down for the night in the northern calm

in wooden boxes lined with styrofoam and cuddled by heating blankets, would tend to lose their efficiency in thirty to forty degree below temperatures.

The geared panaheads worked better under these conditions than the Worrall, whose exposed tracks would pick up ice chunks and tend to make operating less than smooth. Oh, and apart from the film being fairly brittle in that cold, the legs freezing up all the time, and getting the gear from one spot to another, all the crew had to do was worry about keeping warm.

On some of the fifty below days, crew members had to recognize each other by their eyes. Since they were all wearing balaclavas against the wind and cold, the crew found a new meaning for the word "eye contact." Some basic errors (once you've made them) included putting moisturizer lotion on your face to protect against drying out and having it freeze because it had a water base. The solution to that one is called Vaseline. Another was not knowing you had frostbite until it was too late (isn't that always the way it happens?). The solution: the crew was told to keep an eye on each other (again) for the first signs of fingers dropping off.

Under these conditions, a crew and cast can only go in two directions. Complaints and moaning or a stoic acceptance of the fate that brought them to this freezing hell. In this case, the latter happened which is very understandable because they wouldn't have opened their mouths to complain anyway. After thirty-six days of shooting, the crew and cast boarded the Lyubov Orlova for the next part of their shoot in Alaska (for more details see Sid Adilman's marathon coverage in the *Toronto Star*).

If it sounds as if the filming was tough, you might understand the following anecdote told by Derek Browne, the main camera operator.

"It was the second time we did the avalanche and the sun was shining, but there was a pretty wicked wind. After checking another camera position, I got back to my camera. Sandy (McCallum), my assistant and Dale (Wilson) the clapper loader were there. I pulled out my thermometer, held it away from the wind —twenty-five degrees below; turned it into the wind, thirty-five degrees below. Dale looked at me, "Cold, eh?" What else to say? Suddenly, he started to jump from one foot to the other, chanting KA-O-PEC-TATE as he did so. So there was Sandy, Dale and myself, thumping our feet and arms yelling KA-O-PEC-TATE in unison. Don, Don Sharp the director, who is about two hundred and fifty yards away at his camera position looks over to see this. He watches for a minute, then calls over on his walkie-talkie, "We're about ready, what's

going on over there?" I replied, "Just keeping warm guv', just keeping warm."

And that, my friends, is just one way a freezing film crew, trying to make a multi-million dollar film, kept warm.

Although the preceding article makes it sound like a very difficult shoot, the tragic death of helicopter pilot John Soutar from Stewart, made filmmaking rather insignificant. John, who was working consistently with the second unit, was bringing back six crew members when his helicopter collided with another on the ground.

BEAR ISLAND Technical Credits

Producer	Peter Snell
Director	Don Sharp
Screenplay	David Butler Murray Smith
Associate Producer	Bill Hill
Director of Photography	Alan Hume
Production Supervisor	Brian D. Burgess
Supervising Editor	Eric Boyd Perkins
Production Designer	Harold Pottle
1st Assistant Director	Stuart Freeman
2nd Assistant Director	Don Brough
Continuity	Margaret Hanly
Camera Operators	Derek Browne Cyrus Block
Focus Pullers	Sandy McCallum
Clapper/Loaders	David Geddes Dale Wilson
2nd Unit Co-Directors	John Harris Vic Armstrong
2nd Unit Assistant Director	Alan Simmonds
Continuity 2nd Unit	Penny Hynam
2nd Unit Cameraman	Keith Woods
2nd Unit Focus Puller	Theo Egelseder
2nd Unit Loader	Bruce Ingram
Art Director	Kenneth Ryan
Draughtsman	David Moran
Set Dresser	Denise Exshaw
Construction Manager	Bill Simpson
Property Master	Doug Purdy Brian Ganby
Props Buyer	Peter Young
Wardrobe Consultant	Lynne MacKay
Wardrobe Master	Robert Watts
Make Up Artistes	Wally Schneiderman
Make Up Artistes	Phyllis Newman
Hairdresser	Leila Seppanen
Editor	Tony Lower
Assistant Editor	Geoffrey Brown
2nd Assistant Editor	Jack Harris
Sound Mixer	Brian Simmonds
Sound Assistant	Rob Young
Special Effects Co-Ordinator	Roy Whybrow
Special Effects	John Thomas David Harris
Stunt Co-Ordinator	Vic Armstrong
Hydrocopter Specialist	Leif Johansson
Gaffer	John Bartley
Key Grip	Tim Hogan
Best Boy	Ben Rusi
Dolly Grip	John Brown
Key Grip 2nd Unit	Frank Parker
Best Boy 2nd Unit	Shelley Degen
Snow Control Supervisor	Robin Mounsey
Production Accountant	Arthur Tarry
Assistant Accountant	Jak King Jrn
Production Assistant Secretary	Marilyn Clarke
London Contact	Lesley Keane
Stills Photographer	Alan Zenuck
Unit Publicist	Patricia Johnson

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