

MAN

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ON

ON DEADLY GROUND WAS NOT SIMPLY **STEVEN SEAGAL'S** DIRECTORIAL DEBUT, BUT HIS MESSAGE TO THE WORLD AND PEAK OF A SEEMINGLY UNSTOPPABLE RISE TO ACTION-HERO SUPERSTARDOM. SO WHY DID HIS BIG-SCREEN CAREER NEVER QUITE RECOVER?

MISSION





AMID THE SNOW-CAPPED MOUNTAINS

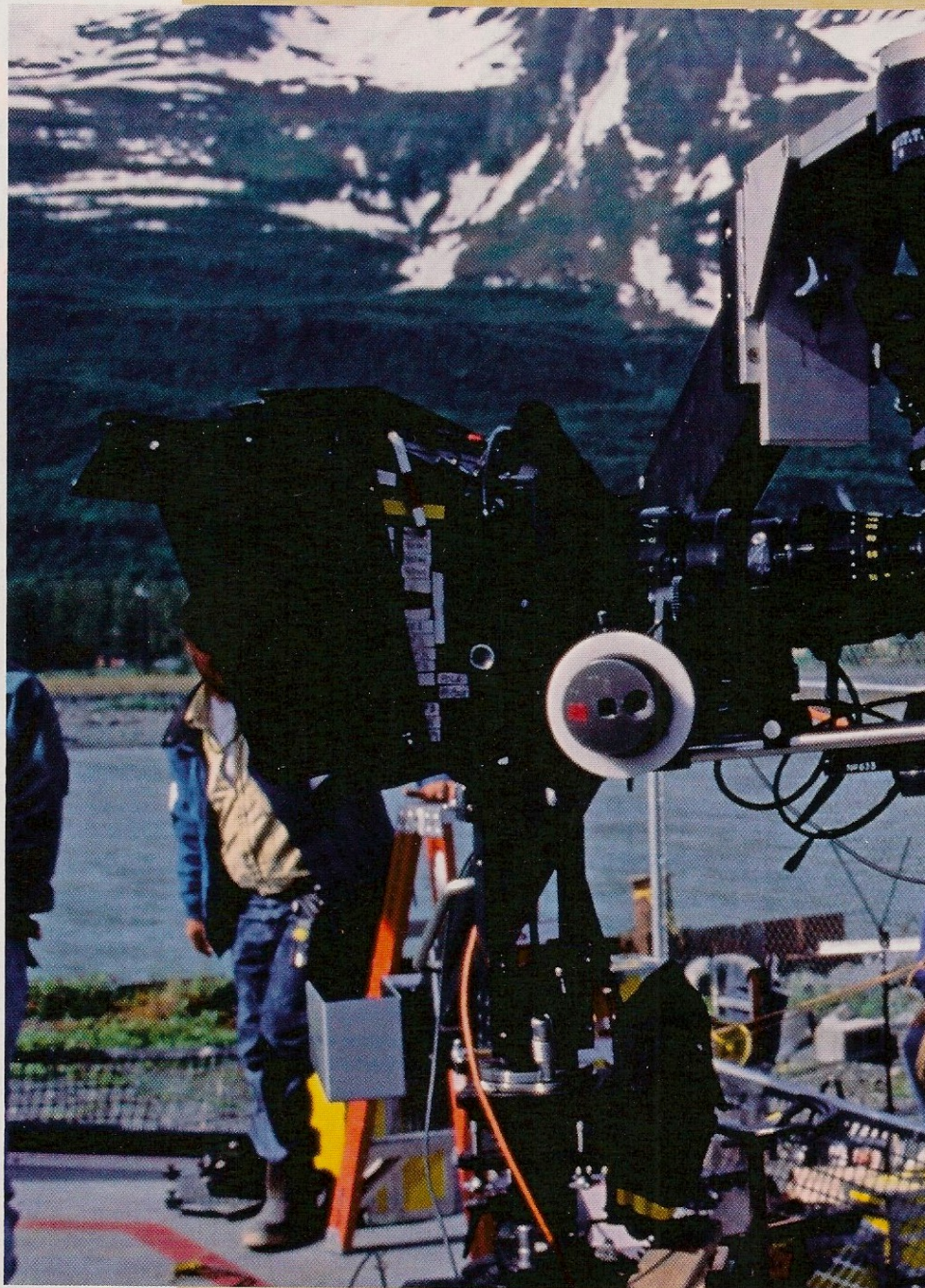
and sprawling pine forests of Valdez, Alaska, in May 1993, Steven Seagal was taking charge. For the first time in his career, the martial artist-turned-action star commanded his own crew, having been handed the reins to a \$50 million Warner Bros. picture, *On Deadly Ground*.

This was a passion project for Seagal: an action movie with an environmental conscience, combining the martial-arts aggression for which he had become renowned, with a political cause that was close to his heart. It was also an ambitious balancing act, involving an arduous five-week location shoot requiring explosions, gun battles, oil fires and sled chases. The locations were remote, often inaccessible by road and in a subarctic environment where the snowfall averaged 300 inches a year. Seagal and his crew would endure blizzards and temperatures that could drop as low as minus seven degrees. But he would persevere. He would deliver the film with minimal compromise to his creative vision. And he would never direct again.

"It wasn't just ego, it was hubris," the film's original screenwriter, Ed Horowitz, tells *Empire*. "He thought he could do it all."

SEAGAL WAS, BY 1993, well used to playing one-man armies, so perhaps he could be forgiven for thinking he could successfully marshal an entire production, while starring in it. His character in *On Deadly Ground*, Forrest Taft, was a typical Seagal character: a hard man with a shady CIA past, working as an environmental agent for a dodgy oil company in Alaska. To play his nemesis, a corrupt oil baron happy to push through construction of a new refinery with defective equipment — and order the assassination of this pesky agent — he cast Michael Caine. Joan Chen, meanwhile, came on board to play Masu, an Inuk who assists Taft, and whose tribe he aids after going on a vision quest and deciding to blow up the new refinery.

Tribal mysticism aside, it was pretty straightforward material, well within Seagal's wheelhouse. But it was a highly challenging production. Co-producer Edward McDonnell recalls Valdez being the second choice of location, after first-choice Nome, located over 600 miles to the north-west, was deemed "too severe". But Valdez caused its own issues. Ironically, despite regular blizzards, it wasn't heavy snowfall which



Michael Caine flanked by goons.



Seagal frames a shot.

caused problems, but unseasonal melts that brought about several days' worth of delays, while snow from the surrounding countryside had to be brought in by truck. That's right: Steven Seagal had to bring *extra* snow to Alaska. "It was difficult, given the extreme location," McDonnell tells *Empire*. "There was no reprieve. And large-scale productions with first-time directors are always problematic. The budget was in constant flux."

Not that Seagal saw it as too much of a challenge. "I didn't really have a problem with the technical side of it, or with directing myself," he said while publicising the film, "but the weather caused serious difficulties. There could be blizzards one day and 90-degree heat the next. But I had to meet my schedule."

In making that move from action star to director, Seagal most likely had one eye on Clint Eastwood, who'd successfully negotiated the same transition during the '70s. Yet Eastwood had started small with the likes of *Play Misty For Me* and *Breezy*. Seagal was plunging headfirst

into a big-budget spectacle. But this comparison isn't quite as crazy as it might at first seem; according to Horowitz, Eastwood had been interested in *On Deadly Ground* during its early development back in 1992.

"My writing partner Robin Russin and I wrote it for Eastwood, and, as I heard it, Eastwood wanted it," says Horowitz. "Seagal had just done *Under Siege* and the studio wanted him to sign for more pictures. He and Eastwood had offices opposite one another on the Warner Bros. lot. There was so much testosterone in that building! My intuition was that one side of that hallway did not like the other. It kind of felt like Main Street in a dusty Western town, waiting for two gunslingers to face off."

Whether or not he truly managed to gazump Dirty Harry himself, Seagal had become a force to be reckoned with, seemingly able to achieve anything he put his mind to. Prior to his film career, he'd been the first western martial-artist ever to open a *dojo* in Japan, where he taught what stuntman and former student Craig Dunn

calls "a very severe form of Aikido: not in terms of people getting injured, but it's a form that works in a practical sense, as opposed to the [more meditative] dance form." His former padawans still refer to him as Seagal Sensei, or Take Sensei (Seagal's Japanese name). When Seagal left the *dojo* for Hollywood, his ex-wife Miyako took over, and still runs it today.

Later, Seagal would find his way onto film sets as a fight choreographer, for example on Sean Connery's unofficial Bond comeback *Never Say Never Again*. When one of his Los Angeles students turned out to be a very impressed Hollywood agent — Michael Ovitz, founder of the Creative Artists Agency — Seagal was able to transition to working in front of the camera, arriving fully formed as the star of his own vehicle, 1988's *Above The Law* (known in the UK as *Nico*). His contemporaries and rivals — Stallone, Schwarzenegger, Van Damme — worked their way up through bit parts, supporting roles and smaller projects before they hit big. This was not the way of Seagal.

"He was very impressive and very cool," remembers producer Mark Canton, Head Of Production at Warner Bros. until 1991, and one of the people responsible for Seagal's film career. "At the time there were all those action heroes. Steven was charismatic and striking and we felt that he had the potential to be a movie star."

Above The Law established Seagal's movie persona — one which, unsurprisingly, is not too far from his own. Nico is an ex-Aikido instructor who's lived in Japan and worked for the CIA before becoming disillusioned: so we immediately have a Seagal character based in part on established and checkable fact, and in part on hazy self-mythologising. He certainly encouraged an air of mystique around his background, especially his possible 'Agency' work. "You can say I lived in Asia for a long time and in Japan I became close to several CIA agents," he told the *LA Times*' Patrick Goldstein in a 1988 interview. "You could say I became an advisor to several CIA agents in the field and, through my friends in the CIA, met many powerful people and did special works and special favours."

Matt Allen, Seagal's intern at the time of *On Deadly Ground*, doesn't believe the star had actually been in the CIA. "My understanding is he was hired as a security freelancer by people who worked for the agency, but he was certainly happy to play up to that image."

Above The Law did the business the producers had hoped for, establishing Seagal as a solid action star and leading to a series of strong-performing, congruously titled B-movie successors: *Hard To Kill*, *Out For Justice* and *Marked For Death*. His shot at the A-list came in 1992's *Under Siege*, the *Die-Hard*-on-a-boat action film that pitted a ship's cook (and former Navy SEAL) against CIA renegade Tommy Lee Jones. Taking \$156 million worldwide, *Under Siege* cemented Seagal's place as Warner Bros.' golden boy. The studio now wanted him for

a four-picture deal, starting with *On Deadly Ground*. Seagal agreed, while negotiating successfully that he should rewrite and direct it.

Eastwood had had the starring role in ten films before he got the chance to direct the small-scale *Play Misty For Me*. Seagal was making the jump on a much larger scale, after just five movies.

ON DEADLY GROUND started as a script titled *Rainbow Warrior* and was inspired by a dream Russin had, which involved Arnold Schwarzenegger riding a killer whale. "I said, 'What the fuck do you want to do with that?'" Horowitz laughs.

This surreal vision of action-hero environmentalism evolved into a narrative based on a Native American myth about the coming of a world-saving messiah. In Horowitz and Russin's original version, the protagonist, Ryan Lynch, was an older everyman, based on Red Adair, famous during the Gulf War for battling oil fires. Tonally, the writers were thinking along the lines of "*Lawrence Of Arabia* in snow", but they also employed the mismatched partners trope that was a staple of action cinema at the time, from *48 Hrs.* to the *Lethal Weapon* series. Lynch was paired with a Yale-trained native Alaskan lawyer who'd dropped out, given up on the courts and become an eco-terrorist.

With Seagal attached, however, the changes began. Among the first was Seagal's insistence that he never worked with a partner on screen. And Ryan Lynch became Forrest Taft, because Seagal thought the name Forrest was, as Horowitz puts it, "greener".

"Some of his ideas were just from another planet," Horowitz says, "but they were the kind of things that make him Seagal. At one point he looked at us and said, 'I'm thinking six mercenaries and a Sikorsky...' I'm wondering why an oil company in Alaska would have mercenaries and Sikorsky helicopters. I looked at him and said, 'I'm thinking 12 and two!' and he just smiled from ear to ear. Robin [Russin] is a Rhodes scholar and his mind would be doing backflips trying to figure this stuff out. I could see him on the couch, shaking with panic."

Lynch's stockpile of explosives became, in Seagal's version, a secret arsenal of heavy weaponry that Taft stashed in a cabin in the woods for no obvious logical reason. Lynch/Taft was supposed to be washed up — a heavy smoker and an alcoholic — but Allen remembers Seagal "would not drink on camera, because of the message he thought it sent to his fans. His compromise was that he would open a flask and sniff it." Allen found himself dispatched to the UCLA library by Seagal to research Inuit culture, and came up with the bizarre "naked Eskimo" vision-quest sequence. "I didn't put the nudity in," he laughs now. "Not my idea!"

How skilled Seagal actually was as a director depends on who you speak to. One source (who worked on the film but prefers not to be named)



Taft and Masu (Joan Chen) get tough.



Taft and the Inuit in Alaska.



THE TAO OF STEVEN

WORDS OF WISDOM, FROM THE BRAIN OF SEAGAL

ILLUSTRATION BILL MCCONKEY

ON THE POWER OF THE MIND

"You can't have a universe without the mind entering into it. Every thought has a frequency. Thoughts send out a magnetic energy."

ON DIVINE INTERVENTION

"A white dog showed up in my *dojo* one day and just wouldn't leave. He stayed for maybe a week, then one night he started barking. I came out and the front of the *dojo* was on fire. The next day he was gone. I don't know who that dog was or what he was, but he saved my life."

ON GENGHIS KHAN

"I don't know that I have anything in common with Genghis Khan, other than that he was the most brilliant military strategist in the history of mankind. He was a very, very smart man."

ON SCREENWRITING

"It doesn't work if the bad guys kill his mother's uncle's friend's neighbour's pet dog. You've got to make the stakes high."

ON REINCARNATION

"People have identified who I was in a past life and I have to respect them. I'd rather dwell on what I'm doing in this life, so I don't talk much about who I supposedly was. But I have to believe it."

ON VLADIMIR PUTIN...

"He's one of the greatest world leaders."

ON THE APPEAL OF HIS OWN MOVIES

"I think people are frustrated in this society, where predators prey upon normal, law-abiding citizens, and you never see justice in the courtroom. In my films, the predators don't get away with it."



believes cinematographer Ric Waite did most of the heavy lifting. Another source remembers him being overly preoccupied with conducting Native American ceremonies to bless each set — though Apanguluk Charlie Kairaiuak, a Yup'ik Indian actor hired as a "cultural advisor", objected to the star setting up "inappropriate" prayer circles. *Empire* puts it to John C. McGinley (who played mercenary henchman MacGruder) that not many people can claim to have been directed by Seagal. "I can barely claim it either," he growls.

Yet Lorenzo di Bonaventura, Senior Vice President of Production at Warner Bros. at the time, insists Seagal was definitely "competent and present", and that it's unfair to diminish his contribution behind the camera. Allen, meanwhile, says Seagal "seemed very comfortable directing the action, and very comfortable directing Michael Caine". Caine wrote in his autobiography *The Elephant To Hollywood* that "Steven and the team were great to work with", though he was hardly complimentary about the film itself. "The wait for a decent movie had made me desperate, and I had broken one of the cardinal rules of bad movies: if you're going to do a bad movie, at least do it in a great location. Here I was, doing a movie where the work was freezing my brain and the weather was freezing my arse..."

Seagal told *Empire* in 2007 that *On Deadly Ground* "was a really nice experience", but he seems less enamoured in interviews at the time. "Directing is very time-consuming," he told *Impact* magazine in 1994. "This picture took a year-and-a-half of my life. I don't think I'll direct that often: just once in a while when I think the subject matter is important. I wanted to direct this one. It's been a desire of mine for some time to make a film that would make a statement about the environment."

One statement in particular would cause the studio headaches. Seagal insisted on a lengthy speech at the end of the film in which he would hold forth on global industries wreaking environmental havoc on worldwide locations home to indigenous populations. Well-intentioned but clumsily executed, it survived, but in a shorter form than the director/star wanted. Still, it lasts four minutes, and concludes with an Inuit blessing.

Greenpeace grudgingly endorsed the film for at least having its heart in the right place. ("I thought the violence was gratuitous and the plot oversimplified the natives' way of life," said spokesperson Pamela Miller, "but the essence of truth was represented.") And, surprisingly, it was nominated for a Political Film Society Award for Human Rights — though it lost out to the indie drama *Go Fish*.

THE MOVIE'S TWO decades on VHS, DVD and streaming platforms (it's available in the UK on Amazon Prime) mean it's well into profit by now, but despite opening at the top of the box office, it

didn't make its money back on its theatrical release (it took only \$39 million in the US — \$11 million less than its budget) and was, to say the least, not particularly well reviewed. *The New York Times* called it "sludge". *Variety* said it was "a vanity production masquerading as a social statement". Seagal had also not enamoured himself of his studio bosses during production. "He was great to work for," says Allen, "but he was hard to work with. If you were on his team he treated you really well, but he was a problem for the people above him in the business. His confidence levels were very high and he really upset the executives at Warner with his insistence on [*On Deadly Ground's*] hard environmental message. They told him to stop preaching, and he accused them of being in league with the oil companies and threatened not to promote the film. They were pissed." Nevertheless, Seagal's relationship with Warner Bros. continued for the rest of the decade, finally ending with *Exit Wounds* in 2001. "There's always creative push and pull between directors and studios," says McDonnell. "Seagal's films were modestly budgeted, and it was beneficial for both sides to keep going."

A safe-bet sequel to *Under Siege* was the immediate follow-up to *On Deadly Ground*, but Seagal's environmental quest continued with 1997's *Fire Down Below* (evil toxic waste-dumpers in Kentucky) and 1998's *The Patriot* (CIA-created pandemic averted thanks to Native American herbal tea). The latter, which has little-to-no action and seems to be an attempt at an actual drama — with Seagal playing the world's greatest research immunologist — was unceremoniously dumped straight to video: his first film to suffer that fate. After this, all but three of his movies would be specifically made for VHS and DVD, right up to his forthcoming release *The Perfect Weapon*.

Under Siege remains, to date, the true apex of Seagal's career; *On Deadly Ground* the grand folly that failed to consolidate that success. Seagal's final studio movie was 2002's underwhelming *Half Past Dead*, after which he ceased to work within the system. Not that it's stopped him making movies. This year alone, Seagal has five films out, with two more in post-production and a third filming.

"I'd love to make the movies I wanna make," he told *Empire*, citing his long-cherished ideas for historical films about Genghis Khan and 17th-century English samurai William Adams, "but as a Buddhist, you know that things are extremely temporary. Every day is a new day and you do whatever you can do to fight the fight. I've managed to shut down dirty toxic plants, nuclear power plants that were going to desecrate holy areas. I've had some luck, you know, but I've also lost some battles. I get out there every day and do all I can to make the world a better place. But you have to understand that you're just one humble piece of the puzzle, bobbing along."

That isn't the climactic speech from *On Deadly Ground*, but it's close enough. ☘