



IF YOU CAN'T AFFORD THE SMELL OF ROASTED CAMERAS YOU'D BETTER STOP BURNING DOWN THE HOUSE

EVERYTHING was on fire, the gun was missing, nobody was sure what had happened to The Girl, and somebody said that a camera assistant was missing - possibly trapped inside the hellish inferno that had been our set just 20 seconds earlier. You know, the set that was currently melting our motion picture cameras into a clump.

But forgive me; I've started in the middle (again).

By the mid-1990s the Fox Broadcasting Company was deep in the process of becoming a legitimate competitor to the traditional "Big Three" networks, and in the spring of 1996, we found ourselves working on a pilot for an action-adventure series called "Lawless," starring Daniel Baldwin.

Danny was hired to play John Lawless, a rough and tumble private eye, or maybe he was a cop trying to prove that he'd been framed, or maybe he was a secret agent on the lam. It really didn't matter what the premise was as long as it had car chases, gunfights, explosions and boobs. You know, the usual.

It was the last day of shooting, and our set was a small single-story house in the middle of the woods somewhere up in Gwinnett County, northeast of Atlanta. The long and winding dirt drive leading up to the house seemed comprised entirely of old muddy ruts, and on my way up I noticed a fire truck parked off to the side. It reminded me that we would be doing a fire effect on set that night.

The scene was pretty typical, something you've undoubtedly seen before: the good guy is pinned down behind a bar hiding from a bad guy wielding an automatic weapon and holding a girl hostage. Realizing that he is surrounded by bottles of alcohol, our hero stands up and throws a bottle of vodka toward the fireplace. When the bottle breaks the atomized vodka ignites, creating a huge fireball, which is just enough of a distraction to allow the good guy to get the upper hand.

I don't know if they've ever tried to replicate this scenario on Mythbusters, but if they do, it won't work because vodka does not have enough alcohol to catch fire and burn. The Hollywood trick is

to set up some propane tanks behind the fireplace and have them blow out a controlled release of propane on cue, using a solenoid valve. It was our understanding that this was exactly the sort of setup that the LA effects crew was using.

While the effects guys were getting their rig set up, the grips were outside, tenting in the house. This meant that they were sealing up all the doors and windows with a heavy black cloth known as Duvateen™ to make it look like night outside. Inside, across from the fireplace, the camera guys were staking out their camera positions and Roger Sherer was making the cameras extra-safe by putting a piece of very clear Plexiglas in front of the lenses to protect them from the initial burst of fire from the fireplace. Meanwhile, it turned out that the stunt team didn't have a double for the actress being held captive, so production convinced the actress' stand-in to work the stunt.

What the heck, it was the last day of the show -- what could possibly go wrong?

Video village had been stationed about 15 feet away from the entrance to the little house, and when we finally started rolling into the stunt I joined the knot of crew mashed in at the monitor. Inside, the director called "action." From off-camera, someone threw a breakaway bottle of vodka against the fireplace and on cue the fireplace belched out a giant poof of flame, which seemed to stretch across the room toward the cameras. The initial blast was really shocking, because for a split second, the increase of air pressure in the house made the flap of Duvateen™ hanging over the doorway shoot straight out at an angle.

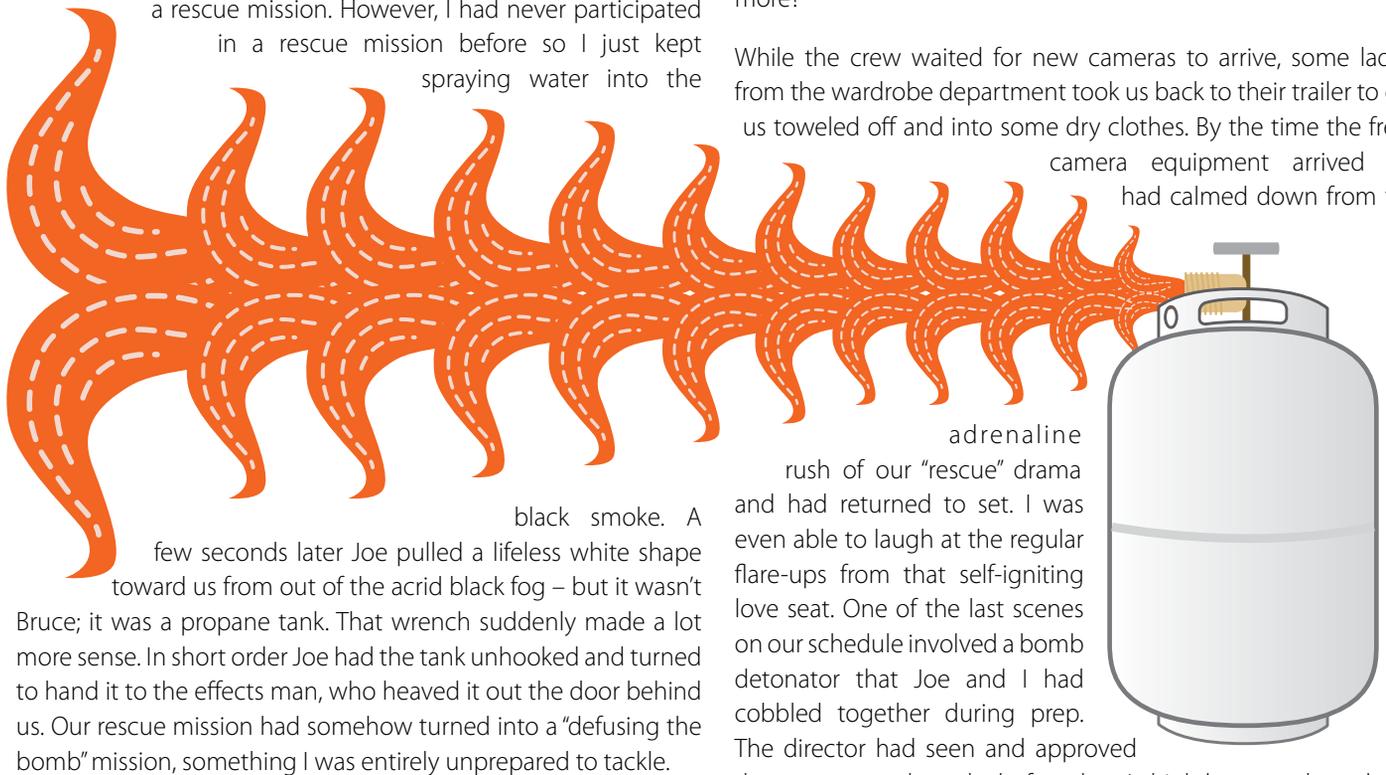
The fire itself looked AWESOME... but it didn't stop.

Flames just kept coming and coming and coming. We later learned that the solenoid had stuck in the open position, effectively turning the special effects setup into a really terrific flamethrower. Those cameras didn't stand a chance. And the crew? Well, we know that the director ran down the hallway and jumped out a side window just behind video village, where we were watching the Plexiglas beginning to curl and bubble and sag under the relentless furnace blast. (For many years following this incident you could go to a local prop house to see the molten sheet of Plexi in person.)

There was SO much shouting and panic! I'm not sure why, but I followed the propmaster, Joe Connolly, around to the other side of the house just in time to hear somebody shout, "I think Bruce (Robinson) is still inside the house!!" and "Where is the girl??"

As we came back around to the front of the house, they had pulled the water truck up near the door and somebody tossed me the nozzle to a water hose and rolled a coil of flat hose down the hill toward us. I bent down and grabbed the end of the hose and screwed the nozzle on just as the pressure hit the line. Joe helped me adjust the nozzle then said, "come on," and turned to go inside the house. We were quickly forced to drop to a duck walk because the thick black smoke boiling out of the door was impenetrable. Within 20 seconds my pullover was wet, but that was good because I was able to breathe through it like a filter as I followed Joe deeper into the building looking for injured crew.

Not long after we'd started into the house, I noticed that one of the local effects guys who was working for the LA effects guys had followed us in. He offered Joe a funny looking wrench – which seemed to be a really weird thing to be doing in the middle of a rescue mission. However, I had never participated in a rescue mission before so I just kept spraying water into the



black smoke. A few seconds later Joe pulled a lifeless white shape toward us from out of the acrid black fog – but it wasn't Bruce; it was a propane tank. That wrench suddenly made a lot more sense. In short order Joe had the tank unhooked and turned to hand it to the effects man, who heaved it out the door behind us. Our rescue mission had somehow turned into a "defusing the bomb" mission, something I was entirely unprepared to tackle.

things went wrong, and the stunt man playing the bad guy had to throw his gun down and help her run for an exit.

We learned that the fire truck had been stuck in the muddy lane at the bottom of the hill, but they finally made it up to set and began extinguishing the remaining hot spots. I still laugh when I think about the love seat that they dragged outside and left near video village; for the rest of that long night it would unexpectedly erupt in flames again.

But the most memorable post-fire image was the sight of three blackened Arriflex cameras sitting on the lift gate of the camera truck, looking for all the world like steamed clams. Astonishingly, the film had not been damaged!

Behind the scenes our producer, the late John Ashley, called back to the office to tell production coordinator Katie Troebs that we'd had a bit of a fire and to get us some fresh cameras. Imagine the shock of the folks at the camera rental house when she phoned them up in the middle of the night to tell them that we'd cooked all of the cameras they'd given us, and could we please have some more?

While the crew waited for new cameras to arrive, some ladies from the wardrobe department took us back to their trailer to get us towed off and into some dry clothes. By the time the fresh camera equipment arrived we had calmed down from the

adrenaline rush of our "rescue" drama and had returned to set. I was even able to laugh at the regular flare-ups from that self-igniting love seat. One of the last scenes on our schedule involved a bomb detonator that Joe and I had cobbled together during prep. The director had seen and approved the prop several weeks before, but I think he must have been pretty rattled by his recent escape from certain death and had decided to concentrate all of his critical reasoning on this gizmo so he could stop thinking about the wall of flames.

I WAS OFFICIALLY POOPING KITTENS!

Before we backed our way out of the burning house, Joe unhooked another tank or two. And as we stood outside sucking in the clean, cool night air I spotted Bruce, safe and sound. After the initial panic had subsided it was determined that everybody had made it out safely. The only scary moment was hearing that the stand-in who'd been turned into a stunt girl had frozen when

I remember being incensed by his request that we "add more switches." And, while I don't remember my exact reply to the man, I do remember Joe stepping over to give me some very practical advice that I will now impart to all of you: "Drew, we don't yell at the director."

Not unless he's on fire.