

“The Sands of Iwo Jima in Hollywood South”

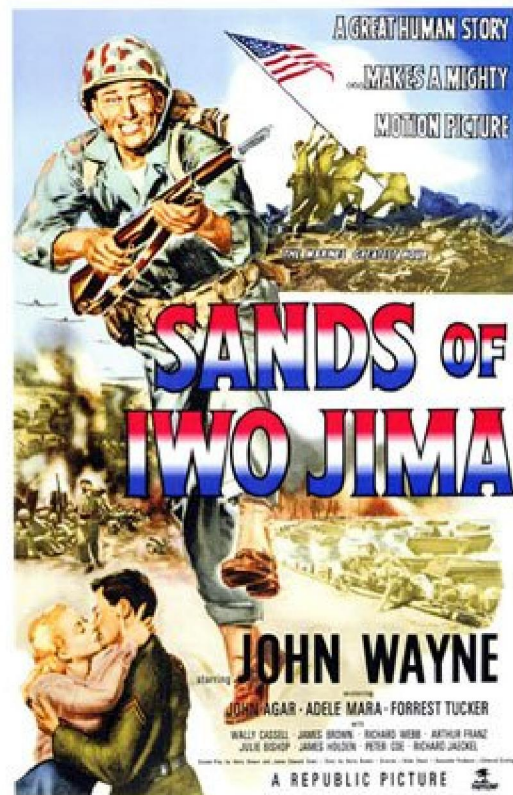
For over a century, San Diego County has provided locations for hundreds of major motion picture films. Since the early 1940s a popular site has been the beaches and hills of Camp Pendleton, one hundred miles south of Hollywood. The sprawling, 125-thousand acre Marine Corps base would host the filming of several patriotic epics during World War II before scoring a huge hit at the decades' end with “The Sands of Iwo Jima.”

Republic Pictures began filming “Iwo” in the summer of 1949. The director was Allan Dwan, a pioneer Hollywood moviemaker who had made over 150 short features in San Diego County in 1910 and 1911--mostly in the backcountry near La Mesa. Now, with a \$1 million budget—dwarfing the expense of any previous Republic work—Dwan had the resources to make a technically challenging feature film.

For the leading role, producer Edmund Grainger signed John Wayne to play the character of John Stryker: a tough Marine sergeant, who leads his squad through the South Pacific battles of Tarawa and Iwo Jima. A “beautiful personal story,” Wayne called it. “A man takes eight boys and has to make men out of them.”

But making authentic-looking Marines out of movie actors would be a problem. “Wayne used to like to stay up at the bar quite late,” the director recalled, “and he could put away a lot.” The younger actors tried to keep up with Wayne and “they’d be a pathetic sight in the morning.”

To turn his hung-over actors into Marines, Dwan asked for help from General Graves B. Erskine, the commandant at Camp Pendleton. The general gave him “the toughest drill sergeant there,” who worked Dwan’s actors in full packs and rifles for hours each day. The men hardened up, went to bed at ten, and “avoided Wayne like a plague.”



Assistance from the Marine Corps would be essential. Home of the First Marine Division and 16,000 Marines--many of whom who take part in the film--the Corps at Pendleton provided planes, tanks, jeeps, trucks, and artillery. “Without Marine cooperation,” Grainger noted, “the picture would have cost at least \$2,500,000.”

Camp Pendleton’s vast and varied topography was perfect for the filmmakers. The beaches would be used to reenact film landings for the battles of Tarawa and Iwo Jima, and the hills stood in for Mount Suribachi—the scene of the famed flag raising over the island.

Using historical photographs of the actual battle sites, Republic’s art director James Sullivan created believable facsimiles of the Pacific islands. His technicians brought in 500 plastic palm trees from Hollywood, built scores of plaster pillboxes and bunkers, and stretched thousands of

feet of barbed wire. To recreate the barren terrain of Iwo Jima, flamethrowers burned off foliage from Pendleton hillsides and covered the ground with oil and lampblack to simulate volcanic ash.

The authenticity of the film sets amazed Marine veterans. General Howland M. (Howlin' Mad) Smith—who commanded the U.S. forces at Iwo Jima and portrayed himself in the film--told reporters “I felt as though I were back in the South Pacific. It’s so real, it’s almost frightening.” General Erskine was impressed enough to ask Grainger to leave the sets standing after the filming to use for Marine training purposes.

The beach landings were shot at Camp Del Mar, Pendleton’s Marine amphibious base. One thousand Marines were filmed invading a mile and a half of beach. Two squadrons of Corsair fighter planes lent from the El Toro Marine Air Station flew overhead. Amtracs, naval cruisers, destroyers, and LST’s supported the movie landings.

The battle for Mount Suribachi was filmed in two parts. Dwan shot the first piece of the sequence in a vast stone quarry, prepared to resemble the slopes of Suribachi. Technicians primed the ground by burying a mile of wire connected to 2,000 sticks of dynamite and fifty black powder bombs. The explosives were encased in directional containers designed to blow up in prescribed angles (to avoid high-priced stars John Wayne, Forest Tucker and others).

The special effects staff added gas machine guns, which sputtered flames instead of bullets, and air valves in the ground to shoot puffs of smoke. When Dwan called “action,” six cameras rolled simultaneously, and Sherman tanks rumbled slowly toward “Mount Suribachi” accompanied by hundreds of Marine riflemen, dodging the carefully orchestrated Hollywood explosions.

To shoot the historic flag-raising, which editors later combined with the stone quarry footage, Dwan used the site of an artillery observation post, modified to resemble the Suribachi volcano. On the day of shooting, three surviving members of the six-man team that raised the flag in World War II joined the cast. Ira Hays, John Bradley, and Rene Gagnon appear briefly in the film before the reenacted flag scene.

“The Sands of Iwo Jima” premiered on December 14, 1949. A huge critical and commercial success, the film garnered several Academy Award nominations, including John Wayne’s first Best Actor nomination. The movie finished eighth on *Variety*’s annual list of top moneymakers.

The success of Camp Pendleton as “Hollywood South” would continue in the 1950s with “Flying Leathernecks,” “Retreat Hell,” “Battle Cry,” and later films, “First to Fight” and “Heartbreak Ridge.”

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