

The Intersection of Hollywood and Arlington Boulevards

BY ROBERT FARR

From the earliest days of the silent film era, producers and directors have found Arlington County to be a hospitable place for filmmaking. There are three primary reasons for this: proximity to and spectacular views of our nation's capital, internationally recognized landmarks and film-friendly military, state and local governments. The history and development of motion pictures can be seen through films with scenes shot in Arlington. The county remains a popular location and regularly fields permit requests from production companies of all sorts.

The Silent Era

The first films were called "actualities," a term that loosely translates into today's documentaries. Beginning with the first commercial exhibition in 1895, producers like Thomas Edison and France's Lumiere Brothers sent cameramen around the globe to capture scenes that middle and working-class families could only dream of visiting. If a newsworthy event was unfolding, enterprising cameramen, often working on "spec," could be counted on to show up and film history in the making. At least as early as 1897 films shot at Fort Myer depicting cavalry reviews and bareback riding exhibitions were popular entertainments.¹

The earliest surviving film shot in Arlington depicts the Wright Brothers' demonstration of their airplane to the military brass at Fort Myer in 1908. This was a momentous occasion in the careers of Wilbur and Orville Wright because a successful demonstration of their airplane's potential as a military vehicle for reconnaissance or weaponry would ensure their fortunes. No less than a \$25,000 award was at stake. Wilbur was in France so Orville conducted several successful demonstrations in early September. These were filmed and the resulting newsreels were distributed all over North America. However, tragedy struck on Sept. 17, when Orville took 175 lb. Lt. Thomas E. Selfridge aloft and the plane apparently buckled under the added weight. The resulting crash severely injured Orville and killed Lt. Selfridge. This was not captured on film, but the crowd of over 2,000 included photojournalists who captured the awful aftermath of the crash and spread the news throughout the world. Ironically, if the fatal crash had been filmed, it would have helped the Army and Orville to piece together the exact cause of the accident, since

witnesses reported seeing a part fly off the plane just before it began its descent.²

In 1924, D.W. Griffith's reputation as a director was beginning to wane. Several years of programmers and big-budget flops were threatening the great director's independence and he needed a hit on the order of his epic *Birth of a Nation*. The 1915 film had told the story of the Civil War from the perspective of the South and was an international hit that solidified his reputation as the world's first great

producer/director. Griffith hit on the idea of telling the story of the Revolutionary War filmed as much as possible in the actual locations. His film was to be called *America* and it was destined to be the last silent historical epic the director would ever make. As usual, Griffith told his story through fictional characters as they witnessed and participated in real historic events. His small company filmed at historic locations in New England, New York, Pennsylvania and as far south as Virginia, where he filmed members of Fort Myer's 3rd Cavalry dressed in buckskin as Morgan's Raiders. Perhaps due to the weakness of the fictional dramas depicted in the film, *America* wasn't the hit that Griffith had hoped for. The fiercely independent producer-director was forced to liquidate his studio at Mamaroneck, NY and become an employee of Paramount Pictures.



America director D.W. Griffith and Colonel Hamilton Hawkins, dressed in buckskin, at Fort Myer, 1924.

The Studio Era and Fort Myer

After Warner Brothers' *The Jazz Singer* ushered in the sound era in 1927, location filming became more difficult. Bulky sound equipment was difficult to move and diminished Depression-era budgets kept all but the largest productions studio-bound in Hollywood. One notable exception was a 1934 RKO military comic melodrama, *Keep 'Em Rolling*, starring Walter Huston as veteran Sgt. Benjamin E. 'Benny' Walsh, whose two loves are the U.S. Army Cavalry and his horse, Rodney. The story concerns the battles that Sgt. Walsh and Rodney face when a new military efficiency expert decides they should both be put out to pasture. Location filming and the participation of the 16th Field Artillery added authenticity to the story.⁴

A generation later another military drama was filmed on location at Fort Myer, *Gardens of Stone* (1987), featuring James Caan as yet another grizzled

veteran, Sergeant Clell Hazard. This Francis Ford Coppola-directed story is set against the Vietnam War years as Sgt. Hazard vainly tries to help young soldiers destined to be shipped off to war.⁵

Arlington National Cemetery

The nation's most hallowed ground made one of its earliest appearances in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951). Fittingly, the cemetery was used as a backdrop for a very effective anti-war message. An alien from another world, Klaatu, lands on Earth to warn humans that unless warfare is eliminated, Earth will be attacked as a threat to the sanctity of life in the rest of the universe. After being wounded by soldiers from Fort Myer (though the base was apparently filmed in California), Klaatu decides to visit Earth in human form. He befriends a family and is taken to Arlington National Cemetery by their young son Bobby. It is here that Klaatu learns of the awful toll that war has taken on this planet. Because location filming did not extend to bringing the actors East, Michael Rennie and Billy Gray filmed their scene against a rear-projected Arlington National Cemetery filmed by the same second-unit crew that filmed the opening scenes of a spaceship landing on the National Mall.⁶

Arlington National Cemetery has made several more appearances since then, often when a main character is buried after serving his country. One of the most affecting scenes of all occurs in *Clear and Present Danger* (1994), when novelist Tom Clancy's hero Jack Ryan attends the funeral of a close friend murdered by the Columbian drug cartels.⁷

Iwo Jima Memorial

Since its dedication in 1955, the Iwo Jima Memorial has been a favorite of both tourists and filmmakers. Shots of the memorial were used in *The Outsider*, a 1961 biopic of Ira Hayes, a Native-American who helped raise the flag on the Japanese island in 1945. Tony Curtis played Hayes in a moving portrayal that is rarely revived.⁸

In 2003, a film whose working title was *The Farm* was shot at the Memorial. An expensive 360 degree shot was planned and filmed at the Memorial, but ultimately omitted in favor of a fairly simple early morning scene between CIA veteran Al Pacino and his protégé, played by a young Colin Farrell, as the pair sit on a bench and share breakfast burritos purchased from a vendor's cart (the author has never seen one of those at the Memorial). The film was ultimately released as *The Recruit* and quickly sank from sight.⁹

Flags of Our Fathers, Clint Eastwood's 2006 film about the soldiers who fought on the island, recreated the dedication ceremony. A call went out for

extras who could provide period clothing and to local antique car clubs for 1945-54 model year vehicles. Filming proceeded briskly in the summer of 2005 and the company returned to Hollywood for completion.¹⁰

Other Arlington Locations

Admire and Consent (1962) was an adaptation of Alan Drury's novel and virtually the entire cast was transported to Washington for location filming. It's a fascinating picture of Washington at the beginning of the Kennedy era. At one point the Congressman played by Don Murray flies to New York City, departing from Washington National Airport, still recognizable half a century later.¹¹

Films shot in Arlington provide a snapshot in time that becomes more precious with the passage of the years. The producers of *Go Day Out* (1987) had no way of knowing that they were creating a record of Pentagon City as it appeared just before Pentagon City Mall, and the development that sprung up around it, was constructed. The film begins (and closes) with an aerial shot beginning at the Pentagon and ending at a house on Arlington Ridge Road. At the time the historic River House apartments stood, but Pentagon City Mall was nothing more than a wooded patch of green. Even the Arlington Ridge Road house that the camera comes to rest on is gone, or at least heavily remodeled.¹²

Deemfact (1998) was filmed in Rosslyn during the blistering summer of 1997. The story concerned the panic leading up to an asteroid's collision with Earth. The Key Bridge plays a prominent role as journalist Téa Leone is harassed by mysterious figures in a black van as she attempts to cross. Another scene was to depict refugees as they trudged through Rosslyn and across the Key Bridge. A large section of Rosslyn was commandeered by the production company for two early morning weekend shoots. Rosslyn was filled with smoke and debris as extras perspired in the mid-summer heat. It was reported that one extra complained of chest pains and had to be treated by paramedics. Alas, the scene is nowhere to be found in the finished film and all scenes depicting Virginia were filmed in Richmond.¹³

Television

Scarecrow and Mrs. King, a spy adventure-romantic comedy series, aired for four seasons from 1983-1987. Amanda King plays an Arlington widow whose life is turned upside down when she meets Lee "Scarecrow" Stetson, a CIA operative who regularly whisks her off on espionage adventures amid heavy doses of romantic tension. Mrs. King is a widowed mom and the exterior of her house is regularly seen, though it is still to be determined whether or not it was filmed in Arlington or elsewhere.¹⁴

Perhaps Arlington's most prominent starring role was in the first season cliffhanger of the Aaron Sorkin series, *The West Wing*. By the end of the 1999-2000 season, the program had performed well enough (ranking #25 in the ratings) that a second season was assured. For Sorkin's season-ending script, President Joshua Bartlett was to be the victim of an assassination plot and his fate, as well as the rest of the cast's, was left hanging. Bartlett was to deliver a lecture in Rosslyn's Newseum building and leave the building via Freedom Plaza, where a gunman would fire from a hotel room opposite the plaza. The interior shots were filmed in Hollywood, but the rest of the complex scene was completed over three all-night shoots during the spring of 1999.¹⁵

When the conclusion to the story was shot in summer 1999, the identities of the survivors and casualties were revealed (though everyone involved with the production was asked to keep this information secret). In this episode, the first of the second season, the Arlington Police Department and Emergency Medical Services had prominent roles. It is not the purpose of this article to spoil any enjoyment the reader may get from watching the films described, so we can only urge readers to take advantage of the resources of the Arlington Public Library and borrow the last DVD of *West Wing*'s first season and the first DVD of the second season. It is a masterfully crafted television program.¹⁶

Wacky Geography

Hollywood writers and directors, then and now, never felt the need to adhere to strict geographical accuracy if the needs of the story could be better served by fiction. Since most of the viewing audience will neither know nor care if geographic locations are being fudged, it has long been considered fair game to place characters in locations and streets as the needs of the screenplay dictate. One example of this occurs in the 2009 Washington political thriller, *State of Play*. A character early in the film strolls down 18th Street in Adams Morgan and quickly descends into the nearest Metro station, located in Rosslyn. No doubt the reason for this is that Adams Morgan was judged to have more visual character than downtown Rosslyn, and the steep escalator in Rosslyn was just what was called for to foreshadow her death at the hands of an unseen villain.¹⁷

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In another example, in *Breach* (2007), spy Robert Hansen and an undercover FBI agent are being tailed by the FBI as they drive along Arlington Boulevard near the Courthouse exit. The FBI radios to headquarters that Hanson is driving eastbound on Wilson Boulevard. One can only wonder why the name “Wilson Boulevard” was considered preferable to “Arlington Boulevard.”¹⁸

For Further Research

It was long thought that the exterior of the garage scenes in *All the President's Men* (1976) were filmed in Rosslyn (the interiors were filmed in the garage under the ABC Entertainment Center in Los Angeles). A close viewing of the film shows that the garage exterior, which features a kind of stairway that Redford climbs, corresponds to no existing structure in Rosslyn or Arlington. This is not to say that such a structure didn't exist in the mid-1970s.¹⁹

A Personal Reminiscence

Until the early 1990s, film permitting in Arlington was done on a department-by-department basis. If a production company needed police services, they would contact the Police Department. If they needed long-term parking permits, they would contact Traffic Engineering. As executive producer of Arlington's government cable channel (and an inveterate movie buff), I was asked to develop a “one-stop shop” to help production companies deal with the myriad of County agencies needed to secure permits to film in Arlington. With the cooperation of other jurisdictions that preceded us, we developed a film-permit questionnaire that attempted to determine what the producers' needs would be and which County departments would need to be involved. Not all production companies went through channels and I would occasionally hear of “run-and-gun” shoots that would bypass the established process. But by and large the major producers were grateful for any help the County could provide and would occasionally offer thanks to Arlington in their credits. It was an exciting, rewarding part of my job for nearly fifteen years and I was privileged to witness the filming of many of the latter-day movies referenced in this article. This important work is now being carried on by Arlington's Department of Economic Development, and no doubt Arlington will be center stage for cinematic adventures for many years to come.²⁰

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Robert (Rob) Farr is executive producer for AVN, Arlington's government access channel and the founder of the Slapsticon film festival. He would like to thank U.S. Army Historian Kim Holien, the Arlington Public Library and the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) for their assistance in researching this article.

¹ Internet Movie Database, www.imdb.com © 1990-2010.

² Fred Howard, *Wilbur and Orville: A Biography of the Wright Brothers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), pp. 262-281.

³ Richard Schickel, *D.W. Griffith: An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), pp. 486-495.

⁴ www.imdb.com.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ DVD viewed by author, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951: Twentieth Century Fox).

⁷ DVD viewed by author, *Clear and Present Danger* (1994: Paramount Pictures).

⁸ www.imdb.com.

⁹ DVD viewed by author, *The Recruit* (2003: Touchstone Pictures).

¹⁰ DVD viewed by author, *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006: Dreamworks SKG).

¹¹ DVD viewed by author, *Advise and Consent* (1962: Columbia Pictures; Warner Home Video).

¹² DVD viewed by author, *No Way Out* (1987: MGM/United Artists Home Video).

¹³ Personal observations of the author.

¹⁴ www.imdb.com.

¹⁵ DVD viewed by author, *The West Wing* (2000: Warner Brothers Television).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ DVD viewed by author, *State of Play* (2009: Universal Pictures Home Video).

¹⁸ DVD viewed by author, *Breach* (2007: University Pictures Home Video).

¹⁹ DVD viewed by author, *All the President's Men* (1976: Warner Brothers Home Video).

²⁰ Personal observations of the author.