

7,000 GUNS FOR HIRE

Hollywood's celluloid gun battles have almost all been fought with weapons from Stembridge Gun Rentals. The firm has an armory some small nations would envy

■ Stembridge Gun Rentals is busy. It is early afternoon, but the time of day seems irrelevant in this gun-cluttered place. The telephone rings.

"They're calling from *Mission: Impossible*," announces Fanny Munson, the sixtyish bookkeeper and niece of the founder. A former piano teacher, she can identify 200 different kinds of guns by sight.

"What's the problem?" asks white-haired Fritz Dickie, who has worked at Stembridge's for 44 years.

"They're shooting over at Vasquez Rocks, and they've run out of ammunition," replies Miss Munson. "They need two boxes of blank .30-06's."

"We got 'em," says Fritz Dickie. "Tell 'em to send the prop man over."

Ed Stembridge, who came to work for his uncle in 1933, enters the room, and an electric eye trips a bell to announce his arrival. He is dark and well-groomed, with an air of southern reticence. "They want the M-16's for *Ice Station Zebra*," he says. "Can we spare them?"

Stembridge's has only four M-16's, the controversial gun that is being used in Viet Nam and can fire 150 rounds a minute—if it doesn't jam.

"Yeah, we can let 'em go—if we get 'em back soon," says Dickie. "We'll need 'em when they start working on *Che*."

Chunky Bob Lane, a 20-year veteran of Stembridge's, is assembling a wagonload of Winchester rifles and Colt pistols. The guns are for a movie ver-

sion of the Broadway musical *Paint Your Wagon*, to star Lee Marvin and Jean Seberg.

A prop man in dark glasses and sunburst shirt arrives with a return load from *Gomer Pyle*. Included are three German rocket launchers and four U.S. 60mm. mortars. Fritz Dickie's practiced eye takes inventory with a glance and he signs the receipt.

Another shipment is being prepared for the production company for Gregory Peck's new picture, *The Chairman*, on location in Wales. Among the items: two Madsen machine pistols, one Russian machine pistol, two Thompson submachine guns, one Beretta .32 automatic pistol. The export certification for such a shipment is stringent, since both the United States and Britain must be assured that the guns are not intended to arm a revolution.

The phone rings again.

Fanny Munson relays the message: "They say they need three boxes of 9mm. blanks for *The FBI*. Have we got them?"

Ed Stembridge shakes his head. "Tell them we can supply two boxes and that's all. We just can't get them because of the war."

Almost every day is like that at Stembridge's—full of the arrivals and the departures of the bang busters. This traffic in the weapons of make-believe death has been going great guns for more than half a century. Although the [Continued on page 78]



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company is located in the back of a building on the Paramount lot (it has no corporate relationship with Paramount itself), Stembridge Gun Rentals has helped to write a sizable chunk of the film history of most of the major studios.

When Ronald Colman, William Powell and Noah Beery battled the desert hordes in the silent version of *Beau Geste*, they fought with Stembridge guns.

Those Air Corps planes that attacked King Kong (in the picture of the same name) atop the Empire State Building plugged the big ape with machine guns supplied by Stembridge.

Stembridge has long provided the firepower for mobsters—from *Little Caesar* to *The Untouchables*. The company armed Errol Flynn in all those World War II battles and Alan Ladd in *This Gun for Hire*. It has put six-guns in the hands of movie gunmen from William S. Hart to Steve McQueen.

Oddly, very few people—even among film insiders—have ever heard of Stembridge's. In view of the company's contribution to Hollywood lore, it is surprising that the place is so little known. Its lack of recognition is due partly to the publicity-shy nature of its managers. But

the whereabouts of the arsenal itself has a lot to do with the matter.

The Stembridge office is well hidden away. A visitor gets there by climbing a flight of stairs in one of the older buildings in the heart of the Paramount lot. He passes through the drapery department, where seamstresses work on curtains and backdrops for movie sets, and enters the prop department. Here he sees the first hint of firepower—three Gatling guns, two of them real firing pieces, one a wooden phony. These weapons have fought off all manner of Indians, from the tribesmen of India in *Gunga Din* to the rampaging redskins swarming against our own western stockades. Finally he comes to the quarters of Stembridge Gun Rentals itself.

The firm occupies three fantastically cluttered rooms. Guns are everywhere, 7,000 of them—rifles stacked in bins, revolvers and pistols of every description mounted on rows of spikes that extend to the ceiling, other weapons behind doors and in cabinets on which are pasted photographs that go back to the beginnings of Hollywood movie-making.

A special display shows the firearms of television's cowpokes—Matt Dillon's Colt single-action, Bat Masterson's Colt Storekeeper, Paladin's double-barrel deringer, Wyatt Earp's Colt Buntline. Another display holds various oddments:

an 1850 palm pistol that shoots between the fingers, a tiny garter-belt pistol for the protection of dance-hall girls, a pepperbox with each cylinder its own barrel, a Luger pistol with shoulder stock attached.

The prizes of the exhibit are two antique German rifles inlaid with ivory—a 1600 matchlock and a 1675 wheel lock. To a collector they are worth perhaps \$5,000 apiece, but the operators of Stembridge's put no price on them. None of the guns is for sale, nor is any premium placed on rare and valuable pieces.

Explains Fritz Dickie: "This isn't a collection—we have guns for rent. And except for the wooden and rubber guns we have for props in mob scenes, every gun will fire."

It is the cheerful personality of Dickie that dominates the company. He is never too busy to chat with visitors about his favorite subject, guns. "You know, this is damned interesting work," he says earnestly. "Every day is different, and it's a real challenge to try to come up with what these movie people want. Hell, I'm 69, and I could have retired long ago. But I'd die if I ever did."

His favorite visitors include William Holden and Glenn Ford, who have been frequenting Stembridge's for more than 25 years. "They're real pros. They know exactly what they need when they start a picture," he says. "Dean Martin is the same way—real down-to-earth."

Dickie's own interest in guns is strictly commercial. He hasn't fired anything but blanks since he was a Missouri farm boy aiming at crows. But there are few men alive who know more about the world's ordnance than Fritz Dickie.

The enterprise dates back to the early teens, when the movie industry had scarcely struggled out of the nickelodeon stage. Founder James Stembridge was a southerner whose forebears managed to end up losers in America's early wars—his ancestors were Tories during the Revolution, and his father fought for the Confederacy with Georgia's forces during the Civil War. Stembridge himself served as a drill sergeant in the Spanish-American conflict, and while on duty in the Philippines he contracted malaria, which plagued him the rest of his life. His illness caused him to foreswear marriage, since he reasoned a wife could expect early widowhood. Yet he managed to survive to the age of 72.

After leaving the Army, Stembridge tried operating a shoe store in Sanford, Florida. But both the business and his health turned bad, and he began drifting across the country. He ended up in Los Angeles, working first in a shoe store, then as an extra in films.

One day Cecil B. De Mille, the legendary director, while doing an army picture, found himself cursed with a platoon of extras who seemed equipped with left feet only. "My God," exclaimed De Mille, "is there anyone here who can make these men look like soldiers?"

"I can, sir," Stembridge announced.

He was placed in charge of the ragtag band, and in a couple of hours he had them marching like army men. He was promptly hired on a permanent basis.

World War I had begun in Europe, and Hollywood was turning to films with a

martial theme. The studios' supply of props was pitifully small, and producers had to scramble to provide enough guns for battle scenes. Stembridge noticed the lack of equipment, and he made a suggestion to his employers at Paramount: "If you'll finance me, I'll start collecting guns to use in pictures. I'll take care of them, and you can use them at a decent rental."

That was the start of Stembridge Gun Rentals.

Jim Stembridge became a fixture on the Paramount lot, but not many studio workers realized that he operated independently. When Paramount moved several blocks south to its present Marathon Street location, Stembridge and his guns went along. He began renting to other studios as well.

One of his first challenges came with *The Big Parade*. The director, King Vidor, insisted on having a machine gun that would fire blanks, but the prop department of his studio, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, said such a thing was impossible. The powder charge in blanks was too weak to blow back the bolt for each shot in a burst.

Vidor took his problem to Stembridge. The gun man and his new assistant, Fritz Dickie, worked until late at night on a plan for a blank-firing machine gun. Finally they devised a method for adding

a muzzle attachment to restrict the gas escape forward, thus building up barrel pressure to augment the recoil backward and actuating the bolt.

The two men took a couple of German Spandaus out to an abandoned barn. The bolt functioned each time. Encouraged, they let go with a burst. The noise was deafening, and the old barn was dense with smoke from the black powder. But Stembridge and Dickie were jubilant. They had a harmless but authentic machine gun.

The procession of World War I movies in the 1920's and '30's provided ample business for Stembridge. He had prepared for it at the end of the war by buying up stocks of weapons in Europe, and he needed them all. For the picture *Hell's Angels*, producer Howard Hughes rented guns by the gross, and in a single spectacle sequence he used 1,200 weapons, to rack up the biggest order in the firm's history.

Universal wanted a vast amount of arms for its film of the German side of the war, *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

Stembridge was able to supply enough of the requisite Spandau and Maxim machine guns, but he lacked Mauser rifles. A supply was located in Belgium. They arrived in poor condition, with firing pins cut off. Stembridge and Dickie attached new firing pins, refinished the stocks and wiped away the rust. Thus Lew Ayres, Louis Wolheim, Ben Alexander and company were able to fight and "die" for the Kaiser with first-rate weapons.

James Stembridge's nephew Ed joined the enterprise in 1933. Ed Stembridge recalls that at the time the growing threat of gang warfare had brought about the passage of federal laws more closely controlling weapons, particularly those in the fully automatic category (which includes any type of machine gun, but not "automatic" pistols, which are actually only semiautomatic). Stembridge's had to register all its true automatics and purchase tax stamps for their use. Even the studios that rented the equipment had to buy the tax stamps. Nowadays, when a studio wants to rent them, special state and federal licenses are required. Whenever the guns leave Stembridge's, a studio policeman or a deputy accompanies them.

World War II brought immense changes to the Stembridge operation, and for the first time the place was used as a real arsenal.

In midafternoon of December 7, 1941, Fritz Dickie received a telephone call at his home from the commander of the Coast Artillery unit at Los Angeles harbor. "It's possible," the officer said, "that the Japanese will attack the mainland. We will need all the weapons we can get. Are your automatic weapons in workable condition?"

"Certainly," said Dickie.

"Can we have them?"

"Of course." That night the guns which had once shot up speakeasies in *Scarface* and *Public Enemy* were loaded into trucks and delivered to the defenders of Los Angeles harbor.

Stembridge's also lent rifles to the Coast Guard on Catalina Island and machine guns, pistols and shotguns to the National Guard. Framed on the wall of the firm's gun room today is a yellowing letter from the harbor defense commander. It reads: "Due to the critical shortage of weapons on December 7, 1941, those provided from your stock were a most welcome addition to our defenses."

The cordial relations thus developed with the military proved valuable in the war years that followed. For instance, Cecil B. De Mille demanded a .50-caliber, water-cooled anti-aircraft gun for his film about the Pacific war, *The Story of Dr. Wassell*. It was impossible to borrow the gun for a movie, but Dickie was permitted to take photographs of one used

for harbor defense. With the pictures as a guide, he fashioned a new jacket for an old .30-caliber machine gun and came up with a weapon that met the approval of De Mille and the thousands of ordnance experts who saw the movie.

When a Japanese Nambu machine gun was needed for *Wake Island*, Dickie created one by casting a new barrel for a Browning. A few changes in British Vickers provided German light machine guns for *North Star*. A Thompson sub-machine gun with a tin jacket became a German Schmeisser burp gun for *The Moon Is Down*.

Everything was done at the time to conserve materials. Prop men scurried around the set after every battle scene, collecting expended shells for reuse. Actors said "Bang!" in rehearsals instead of firing their guns—gunpowder was saved for actual filming.

The government, aware of the propaganda value of Hollywood war movies, helped supply Stembridge's needs for weapons and ammunition. The federal government began providing captured guns for use by the "German" and "Japanese" troops of Central Casting. After

a while, returning veterans with war souvenirs became a steady source of enemy arms.

When the war was over, Stembridge Gun Rentals intensified its search for weapons, looking ahead to the time when Hollywood would be making retrospective films of World War II. Old Jim Stembridge had died in 1942. The enterprise was now operated by a trust headed by Fritz Dickie, Zoe Munson (Jim Stembridge's niece and housekeeper) and nephew Ed, who had served out the war as an Army ordnance officer in the Pacific.

Like the rest of Hollywood, Stembridge Gun Rentals fell idle during the troubled 1950's when it appeared that television was going to run the movies out of business. But then TV's adult Western came into vogue, and the firm began getting more calls for Colts and Winchesters than ever before. Slowly the film business itself crawled back to its feet, and a flood of big Westerns and war epics brought intense activity.

The bang-bang of all the guns was supplied by blank cartridges, of course. A large part of Stembridge's business is

in furnishing them—but not ordinary blanks. "Remington makes blanks for the Army, but they're not photogenic," explains Fritz Dickie. "A gun that just makes a bang doesn't mean much in a movie. You've got to have smoke and fire for dramatic purposes."

The smoke-and-fire department is the small ammunition room upstairs from the gun room. Every possible precaution is taken to prevent the place from blowing itself and the Paramount Studios off the map. Visitors must touch a grounding bar before entering. The floor is grounded, and all electrical wiring is shockproofed. The telephone is outside the door, as is the radio.

Inside the room Stembridge workers prepare 450,000 blanks each year for cowpokes and war heroes and lawmen. A loader can produce about 3,500 blanks per day—carefully.

"The powder mixture depends on how the blanks are to be used," explains Gordon Worthington, another Stembridge worker. "We use black powder for the average Western, flash powder for night work and color film. The machine-gun mixture is smokeless pistol powder plus magnesium, which supplies the flash and adds power for the recoil."

The blanks are prepared on trays, a hundred at a time. Powder is ladled into the casings in quarter, half or full loads. (The S.P.C.A. requires that no more than half loads be shot off around horses; quarter loads are used for firing in a small room, full loads for outdoor battles.) A paper wad is placed in each casing and tamped down into the powder by machine, then the load is sealed with shellac. The wad is all that pops out of a movie gun, and it usually disintegrates harmlessly. But actors have sometimes been hurt, and all Stembridge boxes of blanks bear the warning: "Blanks dangerous within 20 feet." For close-range firing, actors usually "cheat" to the side of the victim, rather than aim directly at him.

The Devil's Brigade, one of the big war films of 1968, shows hundreds of Army weapons. They were loaned to the David Wolper production because of the Pentagon's interest in the picture (it tells about the exploits of a World War II unit that was one of the forerunners of our Green Berets in Viet Nam). Even with all this equipment, Wolper had to call on Stembridge for automatic guns that would fire blanks in battle scenes. Included in the order: six Thompson sub-machine guns at \$40 apiece for the first week, half price the following weeks; four Browning automatic rifles at \$50, same terms; eight German machine pistols, \$40 apiece; six German machine guns, \$50; six Vickers machine guns, \$50. Blanks for the weapons cost \$150 to \$160 per thousand, and 100,000 can be expended in a movie battle.

Almost any time a gun goes off in a movie or on television (no matter how old the film), it's highly probable that firing piece and noise were provided by Stembridge Gun Rentals. Since the company enjoys a virtual monopoly in its field, that situation is likely to remain as long as gunfighters square off on dusty western streets and movie troops go blasting into combat. —Bob Thomas