



*The Franchi SPAS-12 shotgun was used for spectacular dramatic effect in the movie Terminator 2.*

# SHOOT FOR EFFECT

From Harry Callahan To Han Solo, Stembridge Gun Rentals arms the heroes of our generation

by John Fasano

Photos by Ichiro Nagata

**W**hen movie makers need to send some cinematic lead down range they start by calling Syd Stembridge's Hollywood based Stembridge Gun Rentals. The Stembridge family has been supervising the use of firearms in motion pictures since 1914, when Syd's great, great, uncle James Sydney Stembridge, working as a laborer on Cecil B. DeMille's *Squaw Man* — the first film shot in Southern California — volunteered his expertise as an armorer.



*Clockwise from above, perhaps one of the most recognizable guns to ever appear on the silver screen is this highly modified Mauser pistol used by Han Solo in Star Wars — sorry about the mess. A highly customized Mini Uzi was the weapon of choice for Martian security officers in the movie Total Recall. The Joker's henchmen wielded this tricked-out Franchi Model 1962 in the original Batman movie.*



***This page, above, these timeless classics were used by a young John Wayne in the unforgettable movie Stagecoach. Below, in the hallways of the doomed Titanic, Billy Zane fired this custom 1911 at hero Jack Dawson, but is this pistol a movie blunder? Opposite page, top to bottom, this Beretta 92 "carbine" heightened the dramatic tension in the movie Broken Arrow. Al Pacino and Robert DeNiro faced off in the police drama Heat using these Colt 1911 and SIG pistols. Look for this sixgun in Mel Gibson's hand in the new action-thriller Payback.***



Stembridge found himself performing similar duties on more and more silent pictures, and after World War I Stembridge Gun Rentals became the first official source of guns to the film industry. Today Stembridge rents working firearms to all the major film and television studios, with tens of thousands of guns available including machine guns from every era.

GUNS lens master Ichiro Nagata and I visited the Southern California company to get the skinny on how the guns we see in movies get there. Nagata and I began our tour under the guidance of Harry Lu, one of the business' top armorers.

Lu's first stop was the pistol room — lined on all four walls with handguns of every caliber and action from flintlocks to Glocks. This room contains fantasy handguns like Han Solo's blaster from Star Wars — a converted Bolo Mauser — and Bing Crosby's blacksmith shop pistol from Connecticut Yankee In King Author's Court.

I asked where all the guns came from. Lu explained that with rare exceptions, Stembridge has kept every gun they have ever rented. Every gun? He gave me an example: When the producers of the 1994 Robert Downey Jr. film Chaplin came to Stembridge looking for a rifle like the one Charlie Chaplin used in his 1918 film Shoulder Arms, Stembridge said they didn't have one like it — they had the actual one Charlie Chaplin used in that silent classic. They had rented it to him.

### **The Classics Of Today's Movies**

Okay, so what about the 1911 guns that Stembridge supplied to Titanic's producers? They're here, in a place of honor, so we had to ask about the date discrepancy. An unnamed source at the company revealed the truth: "It was a push. It should have been a 1908 auto in .38, or something like that, but sometimes we have to make these decisions based on availability, and more importantly, reliability."

Lu explained that movie guns have to be completely reliable with blanks (Stembridge makes their own). That's why Stembridge would steer the makers of a World War II movies towards

***The pistol room is lined on all four walls with every kind of handgun from flintlocks to Glocks.***

using Walther P-38s over P-08s. The Walther gun is much more reliable with blanks. You don't want a cast and crew of hundreds of people waiting for the guns to go off or stopping in the middle of a complex scene to clear a jam.

### Fill Your Hands, Pilgrim

Moving out of the pistol room we were faced with a wall of western rifles and gear. Here we saw the guns John Wayne used in Stagecoach, as well as James Arness' sidearms from the television series Gunsmoke alongside Paladin's Derringer from Have Gun Will Travel.

The most impressive room housed the machine gun collection, featuring operational machine guns from every era and country. Ignoring the stacks of HK MP-5s, the real jewels were the classic machine guns such as the Lewis Guns that shot King Kong from the top of the Empire State building in 1933.

To our right were working Japanese Type 99 and 92 machine guns last seen in Farewell To The King starring Nick Nolte. Tucked in the back corner was the .30 Browning machine gun that played a major part in the finale of The Wild Bunch. All of the Stembridge employees regard it with special reverence.

### Space Guns For Space Jockeys

While Stembridge has tens of thousands of firearms for rental to the movies, sometimes they are called upon to modify existing firearms to take the place of guns that are no longer available, or haven't been invented yet. Here in the Stembridge machine shop the gunsmiths who maintain this huge collection of guns work their alchemy.

Boxes of revolvers were covered with strips of burlap for duty as "futuristic" sidearms in Kevin Costner's Waterworld. For last summer's Starship Troopers Stembridge clamped Ruger Mini 14s inside fiberglass housings, transforming them into futuristic pulse rifles — pulse rifles that clearly sprayed copious amounts of .223 brass!

There was a Remington 700 .308 Sendero squeezed into an Anschutz fully adjustable match stock for the Clint Eastwood film Absolute Power. Looks great — but if you tried firing a live round through it the stock would come apart like Monica Lewinsky's testimony.

Lu even showed us "Lugers" which were used in films way back before any actual samples of the German sidearm were available on these



shores. The Stenbridge machinists simply created fake Luger bodies over Smith & Wesson revolvers. The cylinders were hidden behind a swinging side plate, and the curved trigger and trigger guard matched the profile of the German auto almost exactly.

### Two For The Price Of One

Since the demands of filming are so rigorous, it's important that a production have more than one copy of each gun being used, especially guns which will be used by major characters. For more strenuous scenes including fights and stunts, Stenbridge can even supply completely realistic rubber guns.

These "fake guns," cast from molds off the actual guns and painted to match, can be thrown, dropped, or whacked against the head of a co-star without doing damage to the actor, or more importantly, the gun.

Lu recounted how after they modified a minigun to be hand held by Arnold Schwarzenegger in Terminator 2, they were informed by the producers that the shot required seeing the gun dropped and hitting the floor. They quickly assembled a duplicate of the minigun that could be dropped on the concrete floor, with a cheaper version of the one-of-a-kind hand held mount on the "beauty" gun.

A year later Harry was perusing some Japanese gun magazine and was surprised to find that Asian replica gun companies had chosen the stand-in minigun as the one to copy for their Air Soft pellet gun version.

### The Hollywood Appeal

Gun manufacturers cooperate with Stenbridge. They know that if they can get their products into high profile action films, it will stir public interest in the gun. When John Milius originally wrote Dirty Harry, Inspector Callahan's gun was a 4" nickel Model 29, but the film's producers were only able to get 6½" blued guns.

In fact, some of the S&W revolvers seen in the first Dirty Harry picture are Model 57 .41 Magnums, because there weren't enough 29s available for all the various scenes. We all know what happened after that: the Model 29 became one of the most sought after guns in history.

In the recent Jean Claude Van Damme/Dennis Rodman action fest Double Team, Stenbridge converted standard 9mm MAC 11s and C-More System's Serendipity sights into FN P-90 space guns.

But who decides what gun will be in which star's hands?

Lu, the man on the set of some of

the decade's biggest action pictures, explained that Stenbridge's job begins when they receive a script from the film company. One of the armorers will go through the film and determine how many, and what kinds of guns are required. Then they will meet with the film's producers and director and discuss possibilities.

I was not unfamiliar with this process. When I wrote the 1990 Eddie Murphy/Nick Nolte action comedy Another 48 Hrs., I had the two bad guy bikers carry a worn 1911 and a Colt Single Action. I saw them as throwbacks — spiritual descendants of the Wild Bunch.

When the Stenbridge representative came to the studio to show the director Walter Hill the guns they could supply for the film, they brought a 1940s era 1911 and a single action — but also a shiny new chrome Desert Eagle .44 Mag. and stainless, short barreled .454 Casull.

You want to guess which set of guns the director chose? Rent the film and check it out. I could use the residuals.

This summer, when Lethal Weapon 4 hit the theaters, rest assured that the blank-spewing hardware was supplied by Stenbridge Gun Rentals — renting guns to movies as long as there have been movies.

