

front-line focus

Amanda Walsh reports on how a Canberra duo landed a huge job, filming the behind-the-scenes documentaries about the making of Spielberg's epic *The Pacific*

When the new HBO blockbuster *The Pacific* hit television screens in the US this week, Canberra production studio By George was popping the champagne corks. A package of behind-the-scenes documentaries filmed by By George Studios is part of *The Pacific* juggernaut, reputed to be the most expensive mini-series in television history.

So how does a small film production house hook into a mini-series produced by Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks? For Canberra cinematographer Robb Shaw-Velzen and his wife, writer/producer Georgina Jenkins, the answer was good contacts, high-level experience and an almighty sales pitch to US cable network HBO.

"A colleague of mine [Richard Moran, formerly of Canberra] works in LA for Channel Nine, and he was having lunch with the line producer [of *The Pacific*], Damien Vena," Shaw-Velzen explains.

The HBO team told Moran they needed an Australian crew to film the behind-the-scenes content of *The Pacific*, and asked the magic question: "Do you know anyone?"

Moran pointed the producers to Shaw-Velzen in Canberra.

It was early 2007, and HBO was already in discussion with production companies in Cairns and Melbourne.

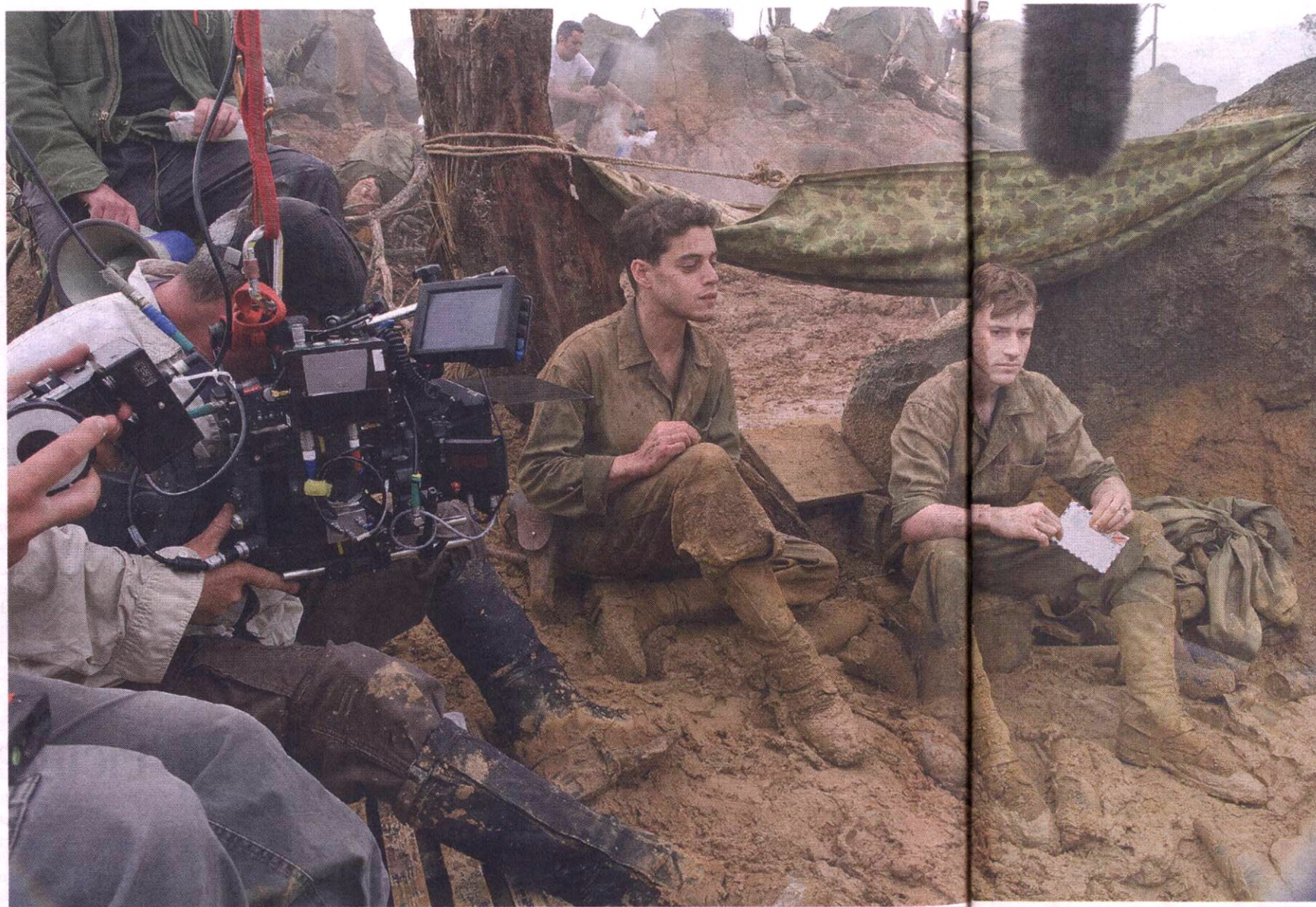
In business since 1996, By George Studios had built its reputation on corporate and promotional videos, music video clips and original short films and documentaries. But Shaw-Velzen and Jenkins had never tackled a job of this scale. So the pair "negotiated heavily" with the American TV giant.

"They're in New York and we're in Canberra," Shaw-Velzen says, "so you're up really late at night to talk to them early in the morning, or you're up really early in the morning to talk to them before they leave work. So that can be difficult, and it was difficult for about two weeks. But once you're on board, it's smooth sailing," he smiles.

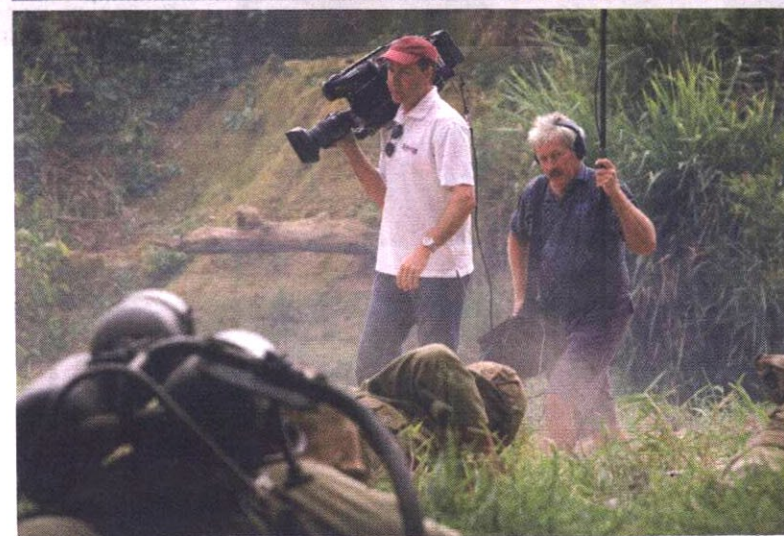
The robust sales pitch was worth the effort. By George Studios embarked on a 16-month project for HBO, to document the mother of all mini-series. And there's no doubt that *The Pacific* is a seriously big deal. The team of executive producers says it all: Steven Spielberg, Tom Hanks and Gary Goetzman, the trio that produced the Emmy Award-winning *Band of Brothers* in 2001.

The Pacific story is based on the real-life experiences of three US marines in the Second World War, with the screenplay crafted around books written by two of them, Robert Leckie and Eugene Sledge.

Although it's a television production, *The Pacific* screams "Hollywood epic". Trailers for the



Filming of Spielberg's epic *The Pacific*.



Shaw-Velzen working on the behind-the-scenes footage.

Photo: Andrew Cooper

mini-series feature vast, cinematic canvases: battlefields awash with bodies, warships under fire from swooping Japanese aircraft, marines slogging through dense jungle. The series was filmed in Australia, around

Port Douglas in Queensland, the You Yangs in regional Victoria and in Melbourne. From all accounts, the production budget came in at \$US250-280 million (\$A270 million-\$A300 million).

Shaw-Velzen was director of photography (Australia) for the behind-the-scenes documentaries, which intersperse interviews with the executive producers, cast and crew with footage of the film sets in action. *The Pacific* started screening in the US on March 14, preceded by the principal documentary which takes pride of place on the official HBO website.

Shaw-Velzen says his brief from HBO was to select what to film and how, as well as arrange and produce interviews with the lead actors and crew, including set designers and military advisers. That was all easier said than done.

Two units – dubbed Red Unit and Blue Unit – were working simultaneously, each with a crew of 350.

"So in one part of the You Yangs you're shooting Iwo Jima, and in the other you're shooting the Peleliu airstrip... It was run, quite seriously, like a military operation," Shaw-Velzen says.

"They actually had a base camp for the actors and make-up and wardrobe, and it was nicknamed the 'sausage factory', because you had up to 300 extras... probably more in some scenes. But you're probably looking at about 150-200 actors on the set at any one time. So on each set, you could be talking about nearly 500 people.

"It doesn't get any bigger," Shaw-Velzen says of *The Pacific*. "It's probably the biggest thing that Australia's seen, over a long period of time as well. You're talking about 12 months of principal photography [filming] with two full units."

For Shaw-Velzen, that translated into shooting 86 hours of footage, the raw material for the package of HBO documentaries.

During his regular filming trips to

Queensland and Victoria, accompanied by a hand-picked team of camera operators and sound recordists, Shaw-Velzen was a constant presence on the sets. It sounds glamorous, but it was a tough gig.

"Probably a general rule of thumb is, crews don't like EPK (electronic press kit) crews, or behind-the-scenes crews, because it's just another three people running around your movie set," Shaw-Velzen says wryly.

"Probably the biggest challenge was getting as much interesting footage onto tape as we could, and not being disruptive in any way. And that means you're not making a sound, you're not hindering an explosives detonator or a stuntman, or in an actor's eyeline."

It was a delicate balancing act. "I've

got a lot of experience on sets, so I knew a lot about protocol and I knew a lot about etiquette. You need to give way to that film and its cast and crew at every turn and opportunity. You do not hold that production up for anything." Not to mention that ending up in a single frame of the production "could have been a career-stopper", Shaw-Velzen says with a laugh.

The crew and cast were first-rate, Shaw-Velzen says. He was a great admirer of *The Pacific*'s directors of photography, Remi Adefarasin and fellow Australian Steve Windon. And he still seems amazed at his great good fortune, being paid to watch them work. "I think that's why we were really fortunate, that the people on that set... were so professional and knew so much about their craft that it was



Above right: Canberra cinematographer Robb Shaw-Velzen and his wife, writer/producer Georgina Jenkins. Photo: Melissa Adams

really easy to be a part of that crew. We never really felt once that we weren't welcomed on set or we were in the wrong place at the wrong time."

But the job posed artistic challenges for Shaw-Velzen, too. The style of filming was not his first choice. The dictum from the HBO producers was: "If it ain't movin', zoomin' and groovin', we don't want to know about it."

"Now that," says Shaw-Velzen diplomatically, "is a different style to the way we would normally shoot things. Americans cut very, very quickly. They have about a two-second, three-second attention span per shot.

"So when we started sending stuff back, the first comment [from HBO] was, 'It's great, guys, it looks wonderful. But lose the tripod. We need you to be moving a lot more'... So we went with that style pretty early on and they seemed to like it, so we stuck with it. But it is different, it's a different way to shoot."

While Canberra proved to be a good base location, in between sets 3000 km apart, the travel was hard work. For 16 months, Shaw-Velzen jetted between Canberra, Cairns and Melbourne, with long road trips either side to the sets. At home in their Chifley studio, wife Jenkins managed the logistics while caring for their baby son. Shaw-Velzen reckons he made a total of around 80 flights for the job, and rues that "the airport became a second office". He laughs about the fact that, back in New York, HBO initially thought his crew could be in the You Yangs for a morning shoot and up in Port Douglas by mid-afternoon.

But the subject matter also made the experience worthwhile. Shaw-Velzen's own grandfather was a Second World War veteran, fighting in Borneo.

"Even though you're sort of detached from it, and you know it's a movie set and you know it's not real, it's hard not to get emotionally involved," he admits. "The beach landing scene was like, 'Oh, my God.' This must have been like walking into hell on earth."

In the midst of this chaotic filming environment, there was pressure on Shaw-Velzen to match the high standards of *The Pacific* production team. *Band of Brothers* had also been shadowed by a behind-the-scenes crew, but HBO realised with hindsight that they hadn't covered enough. This time around, they "really committed to the behind-the-scenes", according to Shaw-Velzen, and wanted a visually high-class, in-depth product. The

documentary crew filmed in high definition, partly because their product is destined for the DVD/Blu-Ray market. And it's here that the full package of documentaries will reach their audience. An unofficial fansite for *The Pacific* has been up and running for more than two years, feeding the huge appetite – in the US and elsewhere – for information about the series. If every one of those blog-hounds, plus a fraction of the expected worldwide audience, buys a copy of the DVD or Blu-Ray, the documentary will find its way into millions of homes.

Any chance of a sneak peek, then? No way. Even Shaw-Velzen hadn't seen an advance copy of *The Pacific*. The premiere was screened in Los Angeles on February 24, but the team from By George Studios didn't attend. (Their invitation must have been lost in the mail, they joke.) Shaw-Velzen is anticipating an Australian screening of *The Pacific* on Channel Seven in mid-April. He's hoping the network will screen his behind-the-scenes content well before then.

Whether this opens news doors for the By George team remains to be seen. Shaw-Velzen isn't hazarding a guess, saying only: "I would hope that, having worked for HBO, and underneath the banner of Tom [Hanks] and Steven [Spielberg] and [co-executive producer and director] Tony To on the CV, [it] might persuade someone that I'm the man for the job."

But it's unlikely that the bright lights will lure Shaw-Velzen and Jenkins away. A veteran of the Canberra production scene, Shaw-Velzen learned his craft at Capital Television in the late 1980s and has been president of the ACT Branch of the Australian Cinematographers Society since 2000. "The local industry has been growing in leaps and bounds in recent years," he says appreciatively, pointing out that at least three other Canberrans were also working on *The Pacific*, in other areas. Shaw-Velzen and Jenkins are firmly established in Canberra and keen to expand the creative side of their business. A feature film is somewhere on the horizon, and they're contemplating a year-long trip around Australia with their two young sons, filming a documentary along the way.

"We've got a lot of boxes left to tick," Shaw-Velzen says.

And as for any future projects in *The Pacific* vein: "I would do that kind of work again in a heartbeat."