

The Battle of San Pietro

By Ed Carter

Considered by many the greatest American documentary made during World War II, "San Pietro" (aka "The Battle of San Pietro") was the second of John Huston's non-fiction war trilogy, after "Report from the Aleutians" (1942), and before "Let There Be Light" (1946). Simultaneously a tribute to the courage and heroism of the ordinary foot soldier (a term that Huston's wartime supervisor Frank Capra preferred to title the film), and an indictment of the waste and futility of this battle and of all war, "San Pietro" stands as a monument to Huston's talents as director, writer, and speaker of his own well chosen words.

Huston had already established his filmmaking credentials prior to his entry into the U.S. Army Signal Corps in April of 1942. He had been nominated for an Academy Award® three times, for writing "Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet" (1940), "Sergeant York" and "The Maltese Falcon" (both 1941).

After his enlistment, the Signal Corps attached him to Capra's film unit, where he first worked on shooting recreations for the documentary "Tunisian Victory." Next, Capra assigned him to show the daily activities of US military personnel on Adak Island in Alaska. The resulting film, "Report from the Aleutians," released in July of 1943, was Oscar® nominated for Best Documentary Feature.

Huston's next major assignment was to document the Allies' recapture of Rome. Plans for such a film were derailed, however, as the Allied advance through southern Italy had slowed to a halt. In the fall of 1943, the Army wanted a film explaining this situation to Americans at home. It attached Huston to the 143rd Infantry Regiment of the 36th Texas Infantry Division, and sent him to the Liri Valley, the site of some of the bloodiest fighting of the Italian Campaign. The tiny village of San Pietro, the key to the entire valley, proved to be nearly impervious to assault. The Germans kept Allied troops at bay, inflicting tremendous casualties. As this project was to be a joint Anglo-American production, British novelist and screenwriter Eric Ambler ("Journey into Fear," "The Mask of Demetrios," "The Cruel Sea") joined the otherwise all American filmmaking crew.

Over many weeks, Huston and his fourteen-member crew (two of whom were killed in battle) shot 45,000 feet of film. It was probably the first time in the war



*A soldier at San Pietro fixes his bayonet to his rifle.
Courtesy Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.*

that an "embedded" film team stayed with a single combat unit for an extended period of time. Huston, Ambler, and Jules Buck (Huston's "fixer" throughout the war, and later a Hollywood producer) even entered the blasted-out remains of San Pietro before the Allied troops they were covering, later returning to document the shell-shocked villagers emerging from their hiding places. During the filming, Huston had no idea what the footage looked like, as it was sent directly to Washington for processing. Only after he returned to Astoria Studios in New York (later moving to Signal Corps facilities on Western Avenue in Los Angeles) could he see what he had, and piece together the film. The Army used footage shot by Huston's team in other Army training films; it also appeared in producer Lester Cowan's feature "The Story of G.I. Joe," released a couple of months after "San Pietro."

Huston's correspondence at the time (held in his collection at the Academy of Motion Pictures' Margaret Herrick Library) clearly presents a filmmaker who considered this film as a creative project, not just an "assignment," and that he wanted to make the film his way, bucking all "suggested" changes from his Army superiors or Washington politicians. Each new memo provoked only argument from Huston, and later he often conveniently "forgot" to make the revisions he had actually agreed to. One memo from Undersecretary of War James Patterson complains that the required changes demanded in previous directives had not been made. At the bottom of the memo is a handwritten line from Capra, saying, "Huston, let's have no more of this insubordination."

Capra suggested an introduction to the film by the Mark Clark, commander of the Fifth Army in Italy, which Huston only added under protest. Huston seems to have had the courage, chutzpah or stupidity to go against direct military orders, as though these were merely creative differences between him and a studio head; of course Capra understood there was more at stake here than just art or box office.

Huston screened his initial five-reel cut to Army brass, who deemed its violence too graphic both for military and civilian audiences. He later cut it to 38 minutes, which still proved too long, so he and his editor, the great William Hornbeck, reworked it still further, to its final release version of 32 minutes. The National Archives has preserved this standard version; the Academy Film Archive has preserved the 38-minute version; the five-reel version existed as late as the early 1960s, but is not known to survive today.

Some of Huston's superiors even described "San Pietro" as "antiwar," which elicited Huston's famous retort, "If I ever make anything *other* than an anti-war film, I hope you take me out and shoot me." However, General George C. Marshall came to the film's defense, saying, "This picture should be seen by every American soldier in training. It will not discour-

age but rather prepare them for the initial shock of combat." For the film, Captain Huston was decorated and promoted to major.

Though "San Pietro" quickly gained distinction as a completely authentic portrayal of the grim realities of combat - a reputation it held for many years - scholars have since learned that almost all the footage used in the film was shot after the fighting was over (the National Archives retains some of this original footage). A disclaimer on some copies of the film hints at this: "All scenes in this picture were photographed within range of enemy small arms or artillery fire. For purposes of continuity a few of these scenes were shot before or after the actual battle of San Pietro." Nevertheless, the film still retains its power as a representation of the horrors of battle, as much from Huston's gung ho-free writing and straightforward, no nonsense narration.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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