

## On Location: Filming the Great Santini

By Frank O Smith

*“And for the flight-jacketed boy on the road to Atlanta, he filled up for the first time, he filled up even though he knew the hatred would return, but for now, he filled up as if he would burst. Ben Meecham filled up on the road to Atlanta with the love of his father, with the love of Santini.”*

closing paragraph  
*The Great Santini*

The last week in September 1978, Bing Crosby Productions comes to Beaufort, South Carolina, to film *The Great Santini*, closely adapted from Pat Conroy's novel.

“We chose Beaufort,” screenwriter/director Lewis John Carlino says, “because it was all here. It was all authentic, all real: the air station, the people, the place.” He says Louisiana and Savannah were considered; but with approval and support from the Marine Corps, Beaufort became the obvious choice.

Carlino (who wrote the screenplay and directed *The Sailor Who Flew From Grace with the Sea*) was attracted, too, by an intangible that registered sharply in his mind the first time he visited.

“There is an extraordinary quality of light in this part of the world,” he says. “It's like the effect in a watercolor. It's magical.”

The magic of the light in Beaufort seems extraordinarily commonplace to

the local citizens, however, in comparison to the luster generated by the thought of Beaufort as the setting of a movie, the residence of movie stars for nine weeks. Life in this picturesque seacoast community continues with the same regularity and adherence to ritual it always had.

But life in Beaufort is altered with the presence of Hollywood. There is a vibrancy, a detectible charge of electricity in the air, a current that all but transforms their world in to something no one can possess.

At eight o'clock this crisp November morning, the sleek transport buses, driven from Hollywood for the duration, roll past the young guard on duty at the front gate of the Marine Air Station and circle in on the base gymnasium.

By 8:15, the last load of extras hired out of the leagues of local Beaufortians - young, adolescent and adult, 300 in all

- stand respectfully, awe-struck like high school freshmen their first day, in a long line which descends the walk in front of the gym.

This is a select cross section of Beaufort: high school boys willing to surrender sideburns and all hints of longish hair; girls in penny loafers and bobby socks, pleated skirts and cashmere sweaters; women filled with fantasy of being stars - all to authenticate a crowd at a high school basketball game, circa 1962.

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**Robert Duvall makes his entrance through a side door. Duvall, the model of a marine in uniform, portrays Lt. Col. Bull Meecham, U.S.M.C. - the Great Santini.**

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They move as one body with like mind. This is their moment - their moment of opportunity to give personal witness to the making of an event in Beaufort's history. Hired as spectators to cheer and boo the heroes and villains of the game, there is no mistaking the real reason they are here. They have come to witness the filming, not the game. Faces in a crowd, their hurrahs will be inconsequential to the chance of seeing "stars."

Shooting doesn't begin until nearly ten.

Before hand, the paraphernalia of movie making - positioning sound equipment, arranging lighting, placing scaffolding for cameras directly in front of the bleachers where the "Meecham

family" will be seated - all has to be methodically attended to.

Carlino, knowing this will be the most important day for shooting the crowd - that is, before the uninitiated become initiated in the tedium of shooting take after take of brief segments of script - gives careful instructions by bullhorn during the wait. He tells the crowd what he expects from them. Their fresh excitement will fade, he knows, but he wants to build on it before it does. Most important, he emphasizes, he does *not* want them to look at the camera. Their focus is to be on the court and the action he will orchestrate there.

Carlino's power to hold them erodes rapidly, however, when Robert Duvall makes his entrance through a side door. Duvall, the model of a marine in uniform, portrays Lt. Col. Bull Meecham, U.S.M.C. - the Great Santini.

Blythe Danner, who has been chosen for her "good looks and ability to portray Lillian Meacham, a woman of quiet strength," makes her entrance: tall, poised, delightfully alluring in her beauty which somehow seems ordinary rather than stunning in this gathering.

As Carlino mounts the scaffold, Duvall and Danner take their places in the stands. The magic moment is about to transpire.

"Places everyone. Quiet now. Rolling. ACTION!"

Over.

And over.

And over again.

Carlino directs the imagination of the crowd to what is happening on the court, eliciting corresponding cheers and catcalls.

The crowd loves it. They love it all. It is more than they can easily absorb.

This moment. So strange. So irrevocably odd. A strain of déjà vu. In the stands directly behind "Lillian," Peggy Egan, Pat Conroy's mother (who has now remarried) cheers in the face of the camera the myth of a son come to life.

The irony of this moment is not lost to her.

With the publication of the book in early Spring 1976 - in the agony of exposure of a family's psyche yielded to public witness - a point of latent conflict ripened between mother and son. Through the tumult of inquisitions by strangers and friends as to the veracity of the story, Peggy Egan professed ignorance, claiming never to have read the book. Beneath that, her emotions were vitriolic.

Each in response to the other, both mother and son felt betrayed. Both came to find emotional vengeance difficult to contain. The frequency of visits between them withered. But on the surface, to the public, there remained civility.

And now the movie.

Peggy Egan, a woman of great social decorum, graciously accepted Lewis John Carlino's invitation to appear in the film. How incomparable the opportunity. How exquisite the triumph.

And yet, so strange, for as the camera records crowd reactions, Peggy Egan and Blythe Danner are caught in the same frame of the film. The double image of a mother is captured forever: the real "Lillian" and the unreal, the make-believe.

In the weeks leading up to his return to Beaufort for the filming, Pat Conroy looked upon the idea of it with feelings quite contrary to eager anticipation.

A writer seeing his second book being made into a film, Conroy's

memories of visiting the set of *Conrack* (the filmed version of *The Water is Wide*) is one of visceral poignancy. There was no meeting of spirits between him and Jon Voight, who portrayed him as the idealistic schoolteacher on Daufuskie Island. It was an unharmonious coming together.

Conroy's apprehensions over visiting the filming of *The Great Santini* in Beaufort went beyond personalities, however.

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*The Water is Wide* was written as much as a defense - a full accounting of what he'd done - as it was an expose on education in Beaufort County, South Carolina. Fired from his teaching job, Conroy went to court only to have the decision upheld. He was presented as a malcontented maverick, unsuited to teach, obsessed with a cause to the point of insubordination. By that, the sanctity of home and of one's hometown was violated with the firing and the court's implicit approval.

*The Water is Wide* was Conroy's side. And in the telling, the wedge of separation bit securely between him and his hometown. It made Beaufort a difficult place for him to visit.

With the publication of *The Great Santini*, the wedge of separation bit a little deeper. Autobiographical in temperament, Conroy chose for it the arena of family, using the conflict

between fathers and sons as its theme. The life of a family was painstakingly laid open like a specimen before a surgeon.

Beginning with the rage of hatred for a man who understood the delicate touch requisite in flying a plane but not the desperate need of a son to be loved by his father, Conroy emerged at the end of the book, however, with the realization of the love he had for Santini.

While his father, Col. Don Conroy, U.S.M.C., Ret., thrashed at reading what his son had written, the love that fills the ending did not escape him. Though it brought the two of them together, there were those in Beaufort who were offended, some repulsed.

Before granting full technical assistance in filming *The Great Santini*, the Marine Corps objected to certain aspects of the original script. Willing to compromise on some points, the Corps was unwilling to endorse the darker side of this particular marine family - the violence, the brutality, the unmentionable offense of wife beating.

One particular scene - after Ben Meecham beats his father on the backyard court in a game of one-one-one - portrayed the wrath of Santini's in explosion. Unable to handle the defeat or the mocking ridicule of a family who'd savored his fall, Bull Meecham focuses in on Lillian with a vicious kick to her backside, driving her up the back steps into the house.

This scene, the Corps said flatly, had to be changed. Lewis John Carlino and producer Charles Pratt agreed to edit the physical contact.

Pat Conroy did not exhibit such censorship when he wrote the book. No doubt his trip to Beaufort might have

been pleasant if he had. On the other hand, he never might have written, never finished his book.

With his mother involved in the actual day-to-day filming, Pat Conroy has persuaded his father to come to Beaufort. This is Conroy's moment, too, his son argues. His father is obliquely hesitant at first.

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**Pat Conroy is uncomfortable watching Duvall build to the point of exploding at Ben's winning the game. The memory of his father's rage, the unpredictable vehemence which once marked their relationship, is made vivid again.**

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His parents have not spoken to one another in the more than two years since their divorce. By his own insistence, by this gesture of gracious inclusion of his father at the filming, Pat Conroy sets himself squarely at the center of the web he's woven.

During his parent's divorce trial (his mother filed action shortly after publication of *The Great Santini*), Conroy had argued with his father against making an appearance in court. Don Conroy wanted to go. He was opposed to divorce, he said, on religious grounds, being Catholic. Pat Conroy persisted, but his father chose to do as he wanted.

Arriving that day at the courthouse, Don Conroy was met at the door by a bailiff. Standing 6'3" and weighing close to 240 pounds, the Great Santini was spun on his heels and commanded to stand spread eagle, his hands against the wall. The Great Santini - with truth in

the legend, - was frisked at the door before being allowed to enter.

The last day Pat Conroy is in Beaufort, he and his father stand at the edge of the concrete pad that has been poured behind the ante-bellum mansion used as the Meecham resident in the film. Here, Michael O'Keefe and Robert Duval - as Ben and Bull - act out the scene of the one-on-one basketball game.

Along with the director, cameraman, and crew, Pat Conroy and Don Conroy watch as take after take is filmed.

Duval's intensity borders on the maniacal: Duvall is Santini.

Pat Conroy is physically uncomfortable watching Duvall build to the point of exploding at Ben's winning the game. The memory of his father's rage, the unpredictable vehemence which once marked their relationship, is made vivid again.

The scene - one of the richest, most vital in both the book and the script - is a total creation out of whole cloth, an inspiration of Pat Conroy's. It's a fantasy, perhaps, of something he'd dreamed capable of achieving in real life: the victory of son over father on his father's terms.

When the last take is finished, the electricity in the air can light a battleship.

Don Conroy nudges his son, raises his voice, and speaks characteristically out of the corner of his mouth in a mock whisper. "Jeez, Pat. Thanks. I ain't ever gonna get a date in Atlanta after this film comes out. Christ!"

Pat Conroy laughs - a high, nervous, heartfelt laugh that eases the tension between them.

Having made their peace - over the lost years of a boyhood as well as the

book - together they say their goodbyes to the movie people and climb into the car to leave Beaufort.

Both are relieved to be heading home, heading home together on the road to Atlanta.

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