

STUDIOCANAL

SILENZIO ©PHOTOS&ARTWORK JEFF.F - EASYCOMPANY

SPECIAL FORCES



EASY COMPANY PRESENTS

DIANE KRUGER DJIMON HOUNSOU BENOIT MAGIMEL
SPECIAL DENIS MENOCHET RAPHAEL PERSONNAZ
FORCES
A FILM BY **STEPHANE RYBOJAD**

1h47

FRENCH RELEASE 2 NOVEMBER 2011

WWW.FACEBOOK.COM/FORCESSPECIALES

STUDIOCANAL

INTERNATIONAL MARKETING

EMILIE MARTEL

1, place du Spectacle

92130 ISSY-LES-MOULINEAUX

+33 1 71 35 11 30

emilie.martel@studiocanal.com



SYNOPSIS

Afghanistan. War correspondent Elsa Casanova is taken hostage by the Taliban. Faced with her imminent execution, a Special Forces unit is dispatched to free her.

In some of the world's most breathtaking yet hostile landscapes, a relentless pursuit begins between her kidnappers who have no intention of letting their prey escape them and a group of soldiers who risk their lives in pursuit of their single aim - to bring her home alive. This strong, independent woman and these men of duty are thrown together and forced to confront situations of great danger that inextricably bind them - emotionally, violently and intimately.



STÉPHANE RYBOJAD DIRECTOR

You are known as a director of television documentaries. What prompted you to move into fiction?

In fact, I started out in fiction and I have always wanted to make fiction films. From the age of 13, I started shooting short films on Super 8 – I must have made more than 200 – then I moved onto “real” shorts on 35mm, of which I shot fifteen. When I was a teenager, I had two dreams: to make movies and to become a ship’s captain. I thought to be a ship’s captain, you had to know your way round everything: the engine room, the radio, the bridge, etc. As for making movies, I had the same idea: I wanted to know everything, understand everything and control everything. I wanted to learn my craft in the smallest detail. I landed my first jobs aged 16. I was stagehand, electrician, assistant camera operator, and so on. I had a short spell in television to earn my living and to finance my short films. And once again, I was electrician, camera operator, focus puller, etc. One day, I found myself making prime-time shows and concert recordings, and I also directed music videos and ads. But I never lost sight of the big screen. I wrote some feature-length films that I tried to put together, but there was always something that stopped them being made. You

just have to think it wasn’t the right moment. Alongside, I had offers of films that I systematically turned down because they were not my kind of thing. I couldn’t get used to the idea that I was going to start out on my cinema career with purely commercial filmmaking. One day, you find you’re in your forties and you say to yourself, I’m not going to change now. So I stuck to my guns.

So how did you come to specialize in documentary?

Eleven years ago I formed the Memento production company with a friend, Thierry Marro, to make the kind of TV programs that we were interested in. And quite naturally, we started to make documentaries dealing with the kind of things we loved, meeting the kind of people who intrigued and fascinated us. I like diving, I’ve done a bit of parachuting, I like extreme sports. So we made a series about high-risk jobs – astronauts, divers with sharks, guys who construct buildings using bamboo scaffolding, fighter pilots, submarine crews, paramedics in far-flung parts of Africa, and so on. All very different jobs, involving very different characters, but all of whom had in common a sort of serenity, appeal and kindness. Thierry likes cooking, so we then turned to the world’s great chefs. That’s how we got started. And then, as we

developed documentaries, we did some more in-depth investigations which led to us making quite a few films. Through our first series on high-risk jobs, it was no surprise that we worked with the Ministry of Defense. When I was young, I wasn’t exactly a military enthusiast – on the contrary. But then I discovered an amazing universe, little known and misunderstood: interesting people who certainly like action but who are anything but warlike; men with real values – solidarity, serving their country, a sense of duty, sacrifice even – and who operate in a universe which is not based on individualism but on the group.

And that’s where you came across Special Forces?

Yes. In 2005, I directed the first documentary, which still remains the only one, on the command structure of the Special Forces, which govern these 3,000 personnel of the French army. But it was the culmination of a long journey. You don’t just stroll into this world which is covered by military secrecy, and which is by necessity extremely closed. Their operations are very precise, often very unusual, and in general top secret. Public relations is not the house style. It’s more a case of discretion, discretion, discretion. Most people who run into

them, and even those who know them as friends, don't know what they do – partly to ensure that they and their families are not subjected to pressure. Following on from this, I naturally became interested in these young people aged around 20 who volunteer to become part of these Special Forces. I wondered what drives these kids to get into it, what motivates them. They are considered to have attained operational maturity around the age of 30, which means that for ten years they are honing their skills, training and continually learning, until one day they are actually involved in the most sensitive and high-risk operations. They go through some very tough training, with a ruthless selection process. It was at this time I met Marius, who was an instructor. This colorful character was in fact one of the cornerstones of my project from the moment I began thinking about a film on this subject.

At what point did you think you had good material for a story?

It came about gradually. First of all, there isn't a day that goes by when I don't think about the kind of films I'd like to make. Then, there were all the ingredients of the kind of movies I love, like *PLATOON*, *BLACK HAWK DOWN*, *THE HURT LOCKER*; not really political but based on current events, which is rare in French cinema: adventure, action, fabulous landscapes and strong human feelings. Spectacle and emotion.

Did you come up with the starting point for the film quite quickly – the mission of a Special Forces unit sent to free a journalist taken hostage in Afghanistan?

Afghanistan emerged as an obvious choice. Firstly, I was a big fan of Joseph Kessel and his books when I was a teenager and they made me want to go there. Secondly, because it's a fascinating country. What's more, Thierry and I were the first to pitch subjects about Afghanistan and what's going on there to French television channels. It took a while to convince them, but we got there in the end. When I was a kid, Afghanistan was at war against the Russians and you couldn't go there. After that, there was the Taliban, and now it's a country that's rebuilding. As for the idea of a journalist taken prisoner, you just have to listen to the news: journalists are regularly kidnapped and taken hostage, that's a sad truth. It's a profession I know well. We have a news division in our production company. We send journalists to the four corners of the world, including theatres of war like Afghanistan, and there's always a moment when you're worried about them. They're friends, we know their wives, we know their kids, it's hard to remain calm and you're always happy when the guys come home. I realized one day that the anxiety of having journalists in difficult places was the same as that of the families of soldiers who also get sent to difficult spots. What's more, journalists and soldiers are obliged to be smart

and work together on the ground. They need each other, despite the fact that their missions are very different. These are two worlds that I know very well. So all of that made me want to make this movie. The main job of Special Forces isn't of course going to rescue hostages or prisoners, but they have the best experience, the best knowledge, the best preparation to do it. They have both the skills and the means. I came up with the pitch very quickly: "There's someone who took risks to do their job, and six other people will in turn take risks as part of their job to rescue her." At the same time, this story is as old as the hills, or in any case as old as literature. It is the six valiant knights who are going to save the princess who's been captured by the Black Prince and who, to succeed in their mission, must cross the evil forest in peril of their lives. Except that I transcribed it to a contemporary context and the evil forest has become the Himalayas. It's *THE SEARCHERS*, *THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN*. It's a tale of a tough challenge – a lost cause, even – that comes down to a simple concept: sacrifice. As with the knights of old, sacrifice is those guys' job.





When did you start to write the screenplay?

Three years ago. I sat down and wrote an initial version in one go. I came up with the characters fairly quickly, drawing inspiration from some of the guys I'd met and also, of course, from what I'd liked to have been. I tried to find a balance in the company between comrades and personalities. There's the veteran, there's the young rookie, there's the tough one, the one who cracks first, etc. Then, of course, I rewrote the script as the project became more defined. I then worked with a journalist who works regularly on our documentaries, Emmanuelle Collomb. She helped me to shape the screenplay, to make it more concise, to give more depth to the journalist's character. And right at the end, on the point of shooting, I called on an American screenwriter friend, Michael Cooper, to both reposition some scenes and to polish up the English dialogue, especially for Djimon and Diane.

You shot most of the film in Tajikistan, a country bordering Afghanistan, which it resembles. Was the spectacular dimension that those landscapes give to the film part of your initial project?

Absolutely. Although everyone — starting with my associates — tried to dissuade me because of the difficulties and the obstacles that we were sure to encounter. But it seemed an essential element of the film that I'd dreamt of. I couldn't see myself filming in Morocco. You couldn't find anything better to get the actors in the right mindset. I was sure that by getting as close as possible to reality, that once we were in the midst of those landscapes and those mountains, they would be totally immersed in this story and, like the crew, totally carried along by the human adventure that such an expedition involves. I also knew that it would pay off in terms of the images. I wanted to make something spectacular, but without cheating. I was sure that in some way, the adventure of the shoot would be echoed in the adventure of the film. We absolutely had to shoot in the Himalayas. But in Afghanistan, it was impossible due to the war. The same goes for Nepal, Kashmir, Pakistan and Tibet, for different reasons. And then there's this little country, Tajikistan, the only place where you can go into the Himalayas by road. It's the old Silk Road, at the crossroads between China, Afghanistan and Pakistan. It's a very poor country and this famous Silk Road has since become the opium and heroin road. Sometimes it's a proper road with full

asphalt, then suddenly it's a crumbling track where it's impossible to pass a truck without driving up the bank, if you can manage to do that. So it was a real adventure. Where we shot, in the Pamir mountain range, the people are very hospitable and kindly. The French army is present at Dushanbe. The capital of Tajikistan is the French support base for Afghanistan. It is less important these days but it serves as the stopover for aviation, notably for evacuations. For us, it provided additional safety — even though we were filming a 20-hour drive up a track from Dushanbe. Well before the shoot, in December, I went to shoot some footage in Kabul and I spent five or six days there for initial location scouting. I wanted to see in situ if it was possible to take 65 French people there, including actors. When I came back, deep down I was convinced it would be OK. I knew it was going to be complicated on a day-to-day level, but that it was really going to be worth it because each little peak you go over is magnificent, each face you see in the street could only exist there. We filmed for five weeks in Tajikistan, then we went for three weeks to Djibouti to film the start of the adventure and the end, when we're in the low valley, and we finished with a week on Mont Blanc for the high mountain scenes.



Did you write the role of the unit chief specially for Djimon Hounsou?

No, but I had the idea very soon after the script was finished. I'd seen *BLOOD DIAMOND* in which I thought he was amazing. I knew that he was from Benin and that he'd arrived in Paris aged 12 and had a tough time, but from taking his chances and meeting the right people he ended up living out the American dream in all its splendor. He's got such great stature and real class, and I like him so much that I really wanted to be the first to offer him a leading role in a French film. He's the actor I went out to get, and he proved he was right for the character. What's more, I liked the idea of making him the unit leader, since when you read the cast list you would have thought it was Benoît Magimel because he's the biggest French star. So that creates a surprise, it strengthens the credibility of this group of men. Benoît was the first to be surprised when he read the script, but he quickly understood that his entry into the action would be all the more anticipated and therefore would have more impact. Benoît was ideal for the role of Tic Tac, who's a debonair character, on the surface very cool, but with a real internal tension.

How did you put together the rest of the cast?

Apart from Marius, for whom I wrote the role specially, I looked for the actors who could best embody each character. The next step was to find out if the actors themselves were interested in the physical and human adventure that the shoot involved. They had to be prepared to do 20 hours non-stop in a 4x4, to sleep in yurts, to eat whatever was available, to climb to 4,000m in altitude. Marius had just left the army when I finished the screenplay, so he was available. I just wondered how he was going to react in a professional environment that was so different to that which he'd known until then. That said, we know each other very well, so he allowed himself to be carried along with the adventure. As a pro of Special Forces, he was an invaluable aid to the actors during the preparation period. And they, as movie professionals, returned the favor during the shoot. They loved each other! I thought of Alain Figlarz very early on for the role of Victor. He's a great stunt specialist and he's a pal. He's funny and charming, so he was always going to be a good traveling companion. I also found that his tough-guy image, the bruiser who becomes this charming man as soon as he starts laughing, reinforced the authenticity and humanity of the character. Like everyone, I was struck when I discovered Denis Ménochet in *INGLOURIOUS BASTERDS*. We got along as soon as we met, and he accepted the role right away. He has a rugby player's physique and

a childlike look, which made him ideal for Lucas, the conscientious objector who accomplishes his mission, but who's really pig-headed, in a very French way. He doesn't like journalists and he makes that clear. He's rather immature and has a clumsy approach to daily life, which doesn't mean he doesn't have a brain and a heart. And when he uses them, he's all the more moving. For the role of Elias, played by Raphaël Personnaz, I saw lots of up-and-coming actors but he stood out thanks to his talent and youth. He has a sparkle in his eyes. Elias is a solitary and brilliant sniper, he's a poet warrior; he's the young recruit and he represents the future. Then it turns out that in real life, Raphaël is best friends with Denis, and Alain Figlarz is a close buddy of Benoît, which strengthened the bonds between them in the film. There was something natural which was already established, which didn't need to be acted.

What about Diane Kruger, what made you think of her?

I already had a project for her, so it was only natural that I thought of her. But it was a bit complicated because her work schedule was crammed. I know lots of female foreign correspondents, and they are often beautiful women that you couldn't imagine, when you see them in Paris, being able to live alone on the other side of the world, wearing jeans and Converse trainers and drinking whisky in a bar! They all have one thing in

common: a hard exterior, which is obviously a sort of protection. They are tough, sharp as razors, but when they reveal their humanity, it's even stronger. That comes back to the kind of actresses that I really like, from Tippi Hedren and Meryl Streep to Jodie Foster and Diane Kruger. Blondes with blue eyes, somewhat out of reach, who seem a little cold but who, once they begin to reveal themselves, are all the more appealing. Diane is an amazing actress, she has that capacity to be able to swing from one emotion to another very quickly, which is fascinating. She can go from laughter to tears in a second, eight times in a row while flying around in a helicopter. I wanted Elsa to be pretty, so the guys would want to carry her through the mountains. That's a factor. But she's not there just because she is pretty. You realize she has formed a personal bond with this country, you understand her commitment to the cause of Afghan women and the consequences that could have for them, and her friendship with one of them which explains that, despite the risks, she returns to see her not get a scoop but because she feel she owes her a debt. What's more, her kidnapping is not a question of money and means to apply pressure but, for the Taliban chief who abducts her, it's a way of obtaining a higher profile. So there's not much room for negotiation, which explains why Special Forces were sent in. She's a woman who has character, sometimes even an iron fist, so that when she can no longer hold back her tears, you

know it's not a sham. At the start, Elsa thinks: "That's fine, you came to fetch me but I didn't ask you to." But gradually, as each obstacle comes along, she starts to be troubled by guilt. I tried to work things so that she had a different relationship with each member of the squad. She is the movie's pivotal point around which all the other characters revolve. It is she who tends to Marius, and who slaps Lucas before forming a friendship with him, and who has the flickerings of a romantic liaison with Tic Tac. Diane imposes a certain authority at the same time as projecting an emotional side, a wonderful sensitivity. During the scene with the biggest emotional charge, she let out this guttural cry that came from deep within, and it sent a shudder through all of us. When she agreed to do the film, and we were sure she was free to make it, we were both relieved and delighted.

There's also the guy who plays her fixer and the Taliban chief who pursues her.

As a journalist in the field, fixers are very important. Amin no doubt has a platonic relationship with Elsa, whom he also protects in some way. The members of the unit distrust him, which is down to experience. They don't really know who he is, and think he could be a traitor playing a double game. They don't treat him very well, but he takes his little revenge. In any case, he's a man with convictions who is defending his country. I really like that character, he's the counterpoint to Zaief,

the Taliban chief. Mehdi Nebbou was the perfect fit for the role of Amin. I saw him in MUNICH of course and in lots of other films. He's got talent in spades and a good screen presence. I also liked the idea that between the characters and the actors playing them there were some underground connections: Mehdi and Djimon both appeared in a Steven Spielberg film, Mehdi, Djimon and Denis all acted in a film by Ridley Scott. I wanted Zaief to straddle two cultures like some of the tribal chiefs, fascinated by both cultures but deep down not belonging to either. People with money, who've had an education, often in some of the top English schools and who return home and find themselves confronted with a very rudimentary, rustic reality. Faced with the journalist, he's reminded of his impressions as a student in Europe. He is charmed by her beauty and subjugated by her strength of character, by her freedom, her commitment. And he cannot stand the fact that she escaped from him; that's something he takes very personally, to the point of going half-crazy.

It was Juliette Ménager, the casting director, who introduced me to Raz Degan, whom she'd already cast in ALEXANDER by Oliver Stone. He's impressive because in real life, Raz is as obsessive as Zaief. On the shoot, he deliberately kept his distance from the others who had formed a bond during their training course and who had quickly formed a group around Diane, who immediately became the leader. Those seven have formed

some genuine bonds and have continued to see each other since.

You mentioned a training course; did you ask them do some special preparation?

It was essential, both for the film and for them. First of all, to place them in the context and so they'd be as credible as possible in these jobs. They followed a week-long commando course for Marines at Lorient in Brittany, where Marius had been posted. When the Special Forces guys saw them arrive, they looked at them like they were extraterrestrials. For their part, the actors felt as if they were arriving on another planet. But soon they were all getting along. Right away they got into the spirit of the thing, they understood the mechanisms of solidarity and teamwork. They were very curious and attentive, and soaked it all up like sponges. The Special Forces were surprised by their capacity to absorb things, and the ease with which they could reproduce their behavior. The more the actors soaked it up, the higher the Special Forces set the bar. Until, on the fifth day, I gave them the green light to raise it even further. One night, 20 guys in helmets and hoods showed up by surprise where the actors were staying. They caught them, dragged them to the ground, tied their hands behind their backs and threw flash and stun grenades. It was a hell of a shock. It was just a way of saying to them: "They're nice guys, but don't forget they do a rather unusual job

in rather unusual circumstances." Of course, they all hated me for that and I knew I was taking a big risk. But they slept on it, and the next day they had all taken it in and understood why I put them through that trial.

Did Diane Kruger take part in that training?

No, I kept Diane separate from the group until the shoot. I arranged for Diane to meet some senior reporters. She spent time listening to them, to understand their motivations and their lifestyle, talking to them and asking questions.

At what point did you go and see the army, and what support did they provide for this project?

It all came about quite naturally because we were already making documentaries about soldiers. On more than one occasion we've spent several months with them. We've had to deal with their central command for some rather complex situations, some fairly strategic problems. Pretty early on, those who I knew well were aware of the project and were a great source of advice during the writing stage, providing detailed documentation, helping me get the situations and behaviors just right, and so on. There was Marius, of course, and also Colonel Jackie Fouquereau, who I met when he was head of the media department in Paris when we made our first film on high-risk jobs, then one on Special Forces and another on the army. We've been friends for 12 years now. His





involvement was on a friendly level before becoming official. A few months before the shoot, headquarters sent him on detachment to act as our military advisor during filming. What's more, he knows Afghanistan and Tajikistan well because he's been on several long missions there. Before we left for Tajikistan, he gave the crew and actors a security briefing. And it was above all his job to ensure communication with army HQ and the ministry of defense.

Jackie Fouquereau was in charge of security. He was in touch with the embassy, French and Afghan intelligence officers, agents of the local secret police who were embedded – with our approval – in the Tajik crew. He also liaised with the general of the Afghan regular army, who was on the other side of the river that forms the border. He was aware of movements in the area and possible risks. Nothing had happened there for three years, and just when we arrived, 25 Taliban escaped from prison. So it was a bit of a hot-spot. Every evening, we had security meetings. We were very well protected, including by the Tajik police who escorted us all the way.

What were the risks?

Anything was possible. The Taliban could have come and abducted Diane for real. There could have been attempts at extortion, since there are some mafia-types in the region, given that it's the heroin road. That said, we were very well protected by the Tajiks themselves, who

wouldn't have ever let anything happen to us. But it was tense. Paradoxically, my greatest fear wasn't about that but instead concerned the little accidents that in such a faraway place could have put the whole shoot in danger. Jackie's job didn't end with security. Since he knows the region well, he also took care of some administrative issues and logistical and information problems, a bit like a production manager. After all, there were almost 80 people on the shoot and we had up to 40 vehicles, so we didn't go unnoticed. Some of the actors nicknamed him "Candy" because they thought he was always optimistic, whatever the situation. Djimon called him "Master Jackie". He took part in casting and training the Taliban extras, most of whom had never held a Kalashnikov in their lives. And after Tajikistan, he left for Djibouti to prepare the second stage of the shoot where we had two very busy weeks working with the military.

For this, your first feature film, how did you together your crew?

It was very simple: I mixed my usual band of adventurers with some movie professionals. They're all friends of mine, most of them for 15 or 20 years. They're used to working in tough conditions, adapting to the most extreme situations, coping with the wind, the snow, the dust, the mountains and the desert. We had to turn around the way movies usually work, and fit in with the elements rather than trying to make them fit in with

our constraints. That's what gave us this freedom of movement once we were on the ground. Of course, at times it came as a surprise to those actors used to more structure, more rules and more comfort, but it was no bad thing. It made them more vulnerable. What a wonderful thing, to sometimes lose your actors, to put them back on track, and then to lose them again! After all, the film is the story of six guys lost in the mountains. What more could you want than six real-life guys genuinely lost in the mountains?

In this film, the boundary between reality and fiction is at times very fragile. That's to some extent what I was after. Otherwise, what's the point going to the Himalayas? What's the point of having them walk up to 3,500-4,000m where the oxygen is thinner? What's the point of putting them in the midst of Special Forces soldiers? What's the point of bringing in real military equipment, the heavy stuff, not movie props? I'm not saying it was all that easy. As in all extreme adventures, there were moments of conflict, moments of doubt and moments of euphoria and exaltation. They found it all quite tough but I think it comes over in the film; you can feel it, and it feeds the film's veracity. In any case, each of them had a powerful, intense, unique personal experience.

What will be your most lasting memory of this adventure?

The scene in which Elias confronts the Taliban alone, covering his comrades' escape. When we were scouting, I immediately noticed this great plateau. It was exactly what I'd had in mind when writing the scene. The day of the shoot was a bit complicated, especially because at that time the sun – which was our only lighting – set at 3.30 in the afternoon. On top of that, it was raining. We said we'd finish the scene the next day. But we already had a heavy workload for that day. We had five days' filming left in Tajikistan and every day, I pushed it back, knowing that I was taking a risk. In the end, we shot the scene on the final day, when we had half an hour of sun left. The scene was complicated because we were shooting as a sequence shot, and Raphaël had to run, fire, simulate taking a hit, roll in the sand, fire, get up, run and then collapse. I sensed that he was ready, that he was the man of the hour, he was like Zidane just as he's about to score. He was incredible, really magical. The look on his face when he picked himself up gave us all goose bumps. If I said that's the moment that stays with me, it's because it symbolizes the whole film, the whole shoot. That feeling of a converted try, of a great match. It was such a joy to live those intense moments that if we had to do it again, I wouldn't change a thing. I'd take the same risks, those cumulative risks which, taken together, bring great moments.



Stéphane RYBOJAD has been a director for more than 20 years. He has directed numerous adverts, music videos and short films that have won awards on the festival circuit. Up until 2000, he also directed hit TV shows and contributed to the artistic renewal of the genre.

His work as a filmmaker has led him to direct and produce more than 100 documentaries which have won several awards. His original approach, his inventive storytelling, his filming at the heart of the action and his journalistic investigations have meant his films have been shown on National Geographic, BBC, ZDF and the Discovery Channel, among others.

Through his films, Stéphane reaches a wide audience, thanks to his universal subjects like Haitian traumatism, extreme poverty (in collaboration with the UN), cyber-criminality, drug trafficking, wars in Bosnia, the Middle East and Afghanistan and extreme jobs. He has also tackled more specifically French topics such as illegal gold prospecting in French Guyana, docu-dramas on the Normandy landings and Special Forces operations in Afghanistan.

It was the latter which inspired him to write the screenplay *SPECIAL FORCES*. He has an almost intimate knowledge of the subject. The focus he brings to bear on the characters is at times intransigent, but always well-meaning. The originality of his approach and of his work convinced us to produce his first dramatic feature film. For Stéphane, making movies means giving the audience a realistic spectacle rich in emotions.





INTERVIEW WITH DIANE KRUGER

What drew you to this project?

The film's subject matter; the idea of the real-life adventure the shoot would no doubt involve; Stéphane's conviction and his desire to make something more than just an action movie. I was also drawn by the character of this dedicated journalist. I did a lot of research and I met many of these exceptional women. I was impressed by their commitment, especially in countries like Afghanistan. They are constantly obliged to negotiate. They are both fearless and vulnerable. It may be pretty tough for them but they're always ready to go back into the fray.

How would you define your character?

Elsa is a committed journalist. She's determined, but at the same time, she believes that by going out there, in some way she is going to be able to change the world by doing her job, in particular helping to liberate Afghan women. But then she realizes it's not like that at all. She is a little weary of this hopeless struggle. And at the same time, she didn't ask anyone to come save her so in the beginning, she keeps her distance from the men from this commando unit. Then gradually, as she understands the extent of

their commitment, their sense of obligation and sacrifice and their courage, she realizes they are all in the same boat. Their relationships are gradually defined, which vary from one character to another.

How would you describe Stéphane Rybojad?

Very adventurous, fearless, someone who loves an adrenalin rush, who actively looks for them. He's passionate about his subject, about the film he's making and he's constantly in pursuit of the truth. He is very instinctive and always trusts the situation.

If you could only keep one memory of this adventure, what would it be?

We had some amazing times. It wasn't always easy because the working conditions were particularly tricky. I will always remember those moments when I was amazed by the breathtaking beauty of the landscapes where we were shooting, landscapes that are usually impossible or even forbidden to access. Also those moments when I found myself alone in the Djibouti desert. That was a completely new and unique experience.

What drew you to this project?

Firstly, and above all, I wanted to make a big movie in France. But French filmmakers rarely tackle films like SPECIAL FORCES, especially on such a scale. People always say the French are hesitant to show the potential of their armed forces on screen. And almost without you realizing it, this film also underscores France's problems integrating a very diverse foreign population, including both citizens from former French colonies and immigrants from around the world.

How would you define your character?

A soldier who has a sense of duty and honor. Despite many other complexities inherent in his personality, in the end, he emerges as a man who has served his country and fought for his brothers in arms.

How would you describe Stéphane Rybojad?

Stéphane is someone who knows exactly what he wants. He's a workaholic who is addicted to creating and who never slacks in his effort.

If you could only keep one memory of this adventure, what would it be?

The moment that marked me the most was when we arrived in Tajikistan, which really signified the life-changing experience that shooting this film would be for most of us. We landed in Tajikistan, climbed into a minibus and some trucks and took a 20-hour trip across sheer cliffs and dangerous mountains before arriving at the place we were shooting, high up in the mountains, where we would stay for a month. A life-or-death challenge such as this is tough to put into words but the people who were there will never forget it.





INTERVIEW WITH BENOÎT MAGIMEL

What drew you to this project?

The adventure of working on such an unusual project. Being able to shoot miles away from home in a country where I probably never would have gone. The trip there was an adventure in itself. It's a region at a crossroads where different worlds meet – the Himalayas, Afghanistan, China and Tajikistan. Simply talking about those places gives you a taste for travel. I was curious to experience an adventure like that. It was a shoot but at the same time, it was an expedition into the unknown.

We were surrounded by armed men, had people from the Russian and French secret police embedded in the crew, and we were shooting just ten yards from the Afghan border, under the charge of the French army. We had a nine-hour flight on a specially chartered plane and then a ten-hour car drive to reach this place in the middle of nowhere. When you agree to do this kind of film, it has to be part of a more personal adventure, otherwise you wouldn't do it. On day one, I found myself in a minefield. For a couple of minutes I wondered what the hell I was doing there, but I just had to open my eyes and look, and the landscape did the rest.

We also had some commando training that I found really motivating. Being allowed into such a secret world was truly fascinating. Moreover, the character of Tic Tac was like no other role in the kind of films I've done before. And the casting was as eclectic as it was appealing: Djimon, Diane, my pal Figlarz, Raphaël, Denis and Mehdi, not forgetting Marius whose presence really added to the authenticity of the characters.

Lastly, I was drawn by Stéphane Rybojad's enthusiasm – I just had to hear him talking about his film and the complicated, even dangerous shooting conditions to know I wanted to make this movie. With all that plus the strength of his conviction, it was difficult to say no!

How would you define your character?

Tic Tac is the most relaxed of the unit. I gave him a painful past that he modestly avoids discussing. He never dramatizes the difficult moments they experience. There's not much space for exploring the characters' psychology in this kind of film. Their characters are revealed in the action and the extreme situations they find themselves in.

How would you describe Stéphane Rybojad?

Stéphane is an adventurer. He loves to travel. While everyone else is having a hard time of things, he is in his element. You could see him as a war correspondent or even in a commando unit, given the fascination and respect he has for these men. The tougher the shooting conditions, the more he loves it. His calm, patience and endurance during the shoot simply demand respect. He always takes the time to talk to those who need it. A director on set has to answer hundreds of questions on a daily basis but with this movie, everything was multiplied tenfold. Yet despite these difficulties, Stéphane was always available. And always reassuring.

What drew you to this project?

I liked the script; I thought it was very tight with a great deal of attention to the characters. I liked that it was the kind of film you don't often see in France. Furthermore, Stéphane told me that Djimon Hounsou was attached to the project and he's someone I've always admired and whose work I've really loved so the idea of acting opposite him held real appeal. There was also the promise of adventure that came with the shoot. It was quite a challenge to be heading off into the Himalayas in such realistic conditions – both a challenge and an opportunity because it's not every day you get the chance to experience such adventures, even in our business. Just that was a good enough reason to do the movie. I'm the kind of person who loves preparation and work, so the idea of doing a training course with the Marine Commandos in Lorient was also very appealing. I thought it was indispensable. If you don't know how to behave like them and you don't understand how they operate, there's no point.

How would you define your character?

He's someone with a lot of doubts so he's constantly making smart comments about everything. He's a rough diamond with a heart of gold. He wants to do his job absolutely perfectly, in the way he handles weapons and things like that, so that he can speak his

mind when he chooses. And he doesn't hold back. He's the one member of the team who is a little less enthusiastic about the mission they've been given because he doesn't like journalists much. But at the same time, he does it to the best of his abilities and he'll see it through, right to the bitter end, like they all will.

How would you describe Stéphane Rybojad?

It's simple. He's a one-man army!

If you could only keep one memory of this adventure, what would it be?

There are so many. I've got loads of amazing memories with different people but the best one was when the whole cast and crew were together at the end of the shoot in Tajikistan, when we got in the plane and we crossed the Himalayas, whereas on the outbound trip, we'd spent 20 hours in a car! Indeed, right up until the last minute, we weren't sure we were going to be able to do it, we were tired and stressed out. Then when we all found ourselves in the plane, above those huge, magnificent mountains, it was magical. It was like we were levitating. It was a unique moment. The chance of a lifetime.





What drew you to this project?

The director's interpretation of the story and the human dimension that he wanted to bring to it – it didn't fully come across in the script but that was something Stéphane really insisted on when he talked to us about the project. With his documentary background and his familiarity with these Special Forces guys, I told myself Stéphane was paying homage to these men and not necessarily to the institution to which they belong. His desire for authenticity was also very appealing. And working so close to Afghanistan in conditions very close to reality was also very exciting because that's not a situation you come across very often in this job. It was also like a childhood dream to make a film with this level of ambition. And beyond the film itself, it was the real-life adventure I was going to experience that really appealed to me and didn't disappoint.

How would you define your character?

It is his first mission on the ground. Elias has everything to prove. He's responsible for the group's security, he has to keep a constant watch over them but he's always hidden, lurking in a corner on his own. He's almost certainly too innocent and too young to have to face the violence of reality. He has no perspective and takes every situation head on. Unlike his buddies, he is unable to establish the critical distance he needs between himself and the violence of what he is experiencing. He has a sense of sacrifice – probably too much so. That's what appealed to me – that denial, that silence

and always keeping watch. At best, this character should have been practically invisible. That was the difficulty – making him exist despite his discretion and self-effacement. To my mind, the real character is the group because each member's character has to be effaced for the benefit of the team and the mission they must accomplish. It's like a theater troupe that puts on a play or a rugby team where the collective effort is what counts. If you start talking about stars within this group, you can be sure that failure will be the only outcome. And don't forget that we shot this film just after France was knocked out of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa so we had the perfect example of exactly what not to do!

How would you describe Stéphane Rybojad?

Secretive, perseverant and seductive.

If you could only keep one memory of this adventure, what would it be?

Once again, it was all about the real-life adventure and that voyage to Tajikistan brought with it a daily dose of emotions that were powerful, brutal and wonderful at the same time. No doubt I will retain the memory of a moment shared with the crew and the inhabitants of the little village in the Pamir mountain range. Their welcome, their faces marked by four decades of war, the smiles of the children, the eyes of the old folk, our innocence and our powerlessness in the face of all that. That day, we all put down our arms.

What drew you to this project?

A passionate and determined director, completely immersed in his subject and a rock-solid script that recounts something other than the usual meting out of punishment you get from war films. A powerful story with real characters and real relationships based on friendship and solidarity. Brothers in arms who'd carry out their mission from start to finish, regardless of the price they have to pay. Also shedding light on the crazy world of the Special Forces. As a civilian, you don't realize people like that exist, who risk their lives to save ours. I know firemen, emergency workers and various special operations units but Special Forces are something else. I'm not usually a very militarist person but it's good people know about the existence of this elite corps. In France, we are very shy about talking about an elite corps while everywhere else, films are being made about them. That's another of Stéphane's strengths – tackling a subject that hasn't previously been explored in French cinema. I've known him a long time, I've followed his career and his work and been blown away by his documentaries so I was even more delighted to be offered a role, especially as someone who mainly works in stunt choreography and coordination. Furthermore, the first time we discussed the film, five or six years ago, it was to talk about the stunts. And then gradually it came about that he wanted me to play the role of Victor. It was great fun. I love acting, especially in this context, with this story in such a fabulous location and with such a great cast.

How would you define your character?

Victor is nothing like me at all! The only thing we have in common is passion. He loves his job like I love mine. Victor is the support vehicle for the team. The one with the munitions. He's an experienced warrior who holds together his team, both physically and morally. He has a pedagogical approach and a friendly attitude. More than anything, he's there to protect them. He's not up there at the front but he keeps his place. Of course he's deeply affected by everything that happens to the group but he stays calm and sees his mission through to the end. Right until he crumbles. But all the characters in this film are great, with flesh, emotion and humanity.

How would you describe Stéphane Rybojad?

Above all as a friend. A faithful friend. He's passionate, he has an aggression, a rage not to win but to see his project through to the end. To please people, to show them something new. His strength is also key. Being able to bring together six guys who couldn't be any more different from one another and turn them into a solid unit of men who help, support and talk to one another is quite something. He was my friend before the film and he's still my friend after, and that's not always the case!

If you could only keep one memory of this adventure, what would it be?

It's tough to pick just one but I'd say the memory of that great camaraderie, the memory of being part of a team. And bringing together six actors like that isn't easy. I will remember a great deal of happiness.





What drew you to this project?

The real-life adventure. I've known Stéphane since 2005 when we did a reportage together for the TV show "Envoyé Spécial". I found him to be an honest, sincere and very interesting man with a solid state of mind. Since then, we've never lost contact. Over the years, I'd been following this project from the start when it was just coming together, right through to him finalizing it. Initially, I was only supposed to be a kind of tactical and technical advisor. Then gradually, as the years passed and the shoot drew closer, he said to me, "I'd like you to play your own role in the film." And because I have complete trust in him, and would follow him blindly in his adventures, I agreed to step up to the challenge he was proposing. And I loved it!

How would you define your character?

Because he asked me to play my own role, he gave me the nickname that was mine when I was in the Marines – Marius. He wrote the role for me, taking into account my way of speaking, my words and my way of behaving. His analysis of my character was both correct and flattering. It was as if I'd described my character myself. And that's why it wasn't that difficult to play. I just put on the costume and away I went. I found myself doing what I'd done for 22 years in the Marines. If I had to describe Marius, I'd say he's the senior guy in the unit. The one with the most experience in the field of external operations. And because he used to be an instructor and dispensed both theory and practical training, the men in this unit have already passed through his hands. That means they respect each other so the ties that bind them are very strong.

How would you describe Stéphane Rybojad?

What struck me the most was Stéphane's foolish idea to head off into this adventure with eight tons of gear and 80 people. And the fact that this crazy gamble was a success, with so much love, serenity, will and determination. I'm still amazed even now!

If you could only keep one memory of this adventure, what would it be?

There are so many. I was struck to find the same professionalism and the same passion for their work among movie technicians as you find in the Special Forces. I was curious about their work, I was constantly asking them questions because I wanted to understand what they were doing and for them, I think this film changed how they viewed the military. No doubt they probably thought it was just full of thugs – after all, I had always thought the movie industry was full of beatniks! Also, I was also impressed by the actors. It's a unique business. I couldn't get over the way they soaked up like sponges all the expressions, gestures and behavioral characteristics of the Special Forces guys when we organized a workshop with my former outfit, the Lorient Marine Commandos. They picked up exactly what they needed for their characters to be credible, and it worked. Hats off to them! But if I had to keep just one memory, it would be my last scene in Chamonix. I'd noticed that for Raphaël's last scene in Djibouti, the first assistant said, "Last shot for Raphaël Personnaz!" and everyone applauded. I hadn't forgotten it but I didn't imagine the huge impact that it would have on me when it was my turn, on how it would make me feel both physically and emotionally. As soon as I heard the applause, Stéphane and I fell into each other's arms and hugged for several minutes. He whispered in my ear, "We did it!" It was very intense and of course it brought many other memories flooding back. I said to him, "Yes, we did it!" and I actually couldn't believe that we had reached the end of that massive gamble, of that huge adventure, and that it was all in the can. It was like that at the end of a commando training session or a special op. We had achieved our objectives. Mission accomplished.

CAST

Diane Kruger	Elsa
Djimon Hounsou	Kovax
Benoît Magimel	Tic Tac
Denis Ménochet	Lucas
Raphaël Personnaz	Elias
Alain Figlarz	Victor
Marius	Marius
Mehdi Nebbou	Amin
Raz Degan	Ahmed Zaief
Tchéky Karyo	Admiral Guezennec



CREW

Directed by	Stéphane Rybojad
Original screenplay	Stéphane Rybojad
Adaptation and dialogues	Stéphane Rybojad and Michael Cooper
In collaboration with	Emmanuelle Collomb
Original music	Xavier Berthelot
Director of photography	David Jankowski
Sound	Arnaud Lavaleix, Benoît Hery and Cyril Holtz
Editing	Stéphane Rybojad and Erwan Pecher
Set design	Christophe Jutz
Producers	Thierry Marro, Benoît Ponsaillé, Stéphane Rybojad