

HOLLYWOOD NEWS !!!!

Slinger, 2018

Chris Strompolos and Eric Zala had dreamed about the Flying Wing airplane since 1981, the summer the two middle schoolers saw its propellers shred the head off a German musclemann in Raiders of the Lost Ark. Thirty-three years later, they built it: a 78-foot-long, 4 ½-ton, gray-green beast that loomed like a frozen vulture midflight. It was the world's only full-scale replica of the Flying Wing. And now they had to blow it up. "I feel kind of sick," Strompolos sighs. "But it has to be done and it has to be done for real."

After three decades, they were finally wrapping the longest film shoot in history.

As children in Mississippi, Chris and Eric had made a pact. They'd film a shot-for-shot remake of Raiders of the Lost Ark. Chris, a chipper, chubby idea guy, would star; Eric, who at 11 was the older and steadier of the two, would direct. They bought a spiral notebook and filled it with sketches and plans. Chris titled it Raiders of the Lost Ark: Kids Version. Then he scribbled out the second half and wrote The New Version. Age would not be a factor.

"We didn't want it to look cute, we didn't want it to be 'Aw, that's adorable,' " Eric says. "We wanted it to be good."

The boys thought filming would take a summer. It took eight years.

The first summer, they storyboarded and gathered props: a jacket, a hat, a whip. The second summer, they got a camera, found a Marion, enlisted cameraman and effects wizard Jayson Lamb a classmate hired after he MacGyvered a passable corpse from Brillo pads, caulk and brown paint and shot the opening jungle scene and the flaming bar fight.

Just before school started, crises struck: Eric's parents announced they were getting a divorce, their Marion announced she was moving to Alaska, and Jayson realized he'd screwed up the camcorder settings and burned a tiny A into the corner of the frame.

Summer three, they started over.

When Raiders needed a monkey, they used Chris' dog, Snickers. When they needed a new Marion, they wooed a pretty girl from church to give up her summers and hang with the geeks. (Says Chris, "I thought she was cool because she smoked cigarettes. Capri Lights.") She was Chris' first kiss and they flirted until she ditched him for an extra playing a Nazi. When they needed an Egyptian tomb, they stenciled hieroglyphics in Eric's basement. When the script called for a bar fire, they poured 36 bottles of rubbing alcohol on themselves and the cellar walls and lit a match. (That move got production grounded for a year.)

Eric, who doubled as the opportunistic French archaeologist Belloq, singed his hair. Before shooting wrapped, he'd also broken an arm and been rushed to the hospital after Jayson used industrial plaster to make a mold of his face. (The ER doctors had to break him out with sledgehammers and chain saws.)

Astonishingly, Chris completed the film unscathed a wonder, given that he did every one of Indiana Jones' stunts without Harrison Ford's innate athleticism (or four stunt doubles).

"I'm a stubby Greek guy, and he's an angular, 6-foot, 1-inch movie star," Strompolos admits today. But in front of the cameras he was a natural, his puppy fat balanced out by his strong jawline, loose grace and total commitment.

"For Chris, it was wanting to be Indiana Jones and saving the girl. For me, it was, 'OK, what would a shot-for-shot remake of Raiders of the Lost Ark look like?' " Eric says. "Tracing the footsteps of the master what a great learning tool."

The boys built giant test boulders from papier-mâché, chicken wire, bamboo sticks and a giant cable spool, until they figured out Fiberglas was best. They filmed scenes in alleys and dirt quarries and alligator-infested rivers, enlisted every neighborhood kid they knew as an extra, dragged Chris behind a truck, and rigged their own explosives from gunpowder Jayson bought at Mom and Pop's General Store and Gun Shop, even though he was so short he could barely reach over the counter. After a three-year letter-writing campaign, they even convinced a naval captain to loan them a battleship and submarine.

It sounds like fun, and sometimes it was. More often, it was stressful.

"I was haunted by a sense of dread," Eric recalls. " 'None of this counts if we don't finish.' " "

When they edited the footage during the graveyard shift at the local news station, where Chris' mother was a news anchor, they made peace with the way that the actors had visibly skipped in age with each scene change: 13 to 17 to 16 to 14. It was as though Indy were leaping in and out of a wormhole. It would have to do.

Still, the most amazing thing about Raiders: The Adaptation isn't that the friends conceived of it. It's that they completed it.

Almost.

They couldn't get a plane.

Without one, Eric and Chris were forced to leave out Raiders of the Lost Ark's six-minute, most complicated action scene. It goes like this: Indiana Jones and Marion break out of an archaeological site called the Well of Souls, where they've been left to rot by the Nazis. Jones spots a Nazi plane the Flying Wing and guesses the Ark of the Covenant is aboard. He conks a mechanic and wearily boxes a second, shirtless, macho man.

Screenshot from the original Raiders of the Lost Ark airplane fight scene Screenshot from the original Raiders of the Lost Ark airplane fight scene

Meanwhile, Marion gets trapped inside the cockpit while the plane starts spinning in circles. Soldiers attack. Marion machine-guns them down, punctures a fuel truck and accidentally ignites a barrel of dynamite. As fire crawls toward the plane, Indiana Jones is knocked to the ground just before a propeller grinds up the German's head. Jones frees Marion and the two heroes sprint to safety as the Flying Wing explodes.

Even if they could have borrowed a plane, what madman would have let children blow it sky-high?

Jayson suggested they use miniatures. Eric, a literalist, refused. If Spielberg had used a real plane, so would they.

Then they realized a weakness in the script. Narratively, the Flying Wing scene was pointless. The Ark was never on the plane. Indiana Jones and Marion had murdered a dozen people for no reason at all. In fact, Raiders: The Adaptation could cut from the Well of Souls escape to Jones chasing down the Ark on horseback without missing a beat.

The young filmmakers wrapped without it. By then, the high school seniors were barely speaking, thanks to a fight over a girl and the sense that the whole thing was kind of embarrassing. They left Mississippi for college and moved on with their lives.

Eventually, Chris and Eric both wound up in L.A. Strompolos formed a rock band and lost much of his 20s to meth; Zala became a manager at a video game company. Raiders was a goof, a childhood fixation stashed away on a VHS tape, given no more importance than the Ark itself, left languishing in a warehouse at the end of the real movie. Their film remained forgotten for 25 years.