

first by Robert Wise for the Jake Holman role in *The Sand Pebbles*. In McQueen's mind, he was second fiddle to Paul Newman.

When David Foster showed the *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* script to Steve, McQueen thought it would be the perfect opportunity to show the world who was the bigger star. But then Newman balked at the idea of working with Steve, possibly fearing that McQueen would be the more dominant of the two on screen.

The tide turned for Steve on *Bullitt*. With its smashing success, McQueen was more sought after than Paul Newman. McQueen held the juice. Now it was Steve whom the producers came to first. Says James Coburn, "Steve was the reason the bankers came up with the bread to fund *The Towering Inferno*. They said, 'We need that guy,' and they got him."

McQueen was originally offered the role of the architect, the one later played by Newman. Steve read the script and sensed the role of the fire chief had more of a possibility for heroic proportions. John Guillermin, director of *The Towering Inferno*, recalled, "Ernest Borgnine was originally asked to play the fire chief and McQueen was going to be the architect. The fire chief had ten pages in the first draft, but Steve had tremendous instinct for the heart of the picture. He felt the role of the architect was pasted together. Steve said, 'If somebody of my caliber can play the architect, I'll play the fire chief.' That's where the idea to cast Paul Newman came in." Once again, Steve used his old sounding board, Neile, for advice. "I'm more intrigued with the fire chief, but it's a smaller role." Neile asked him, "Is it a cameo role?" Steve answered, "No, no. But he doesn't come in till halfway through the film. What do you think about that?" Neile assured him that he'd be fine. He had always dominated the screen with his presence and, as long as his role continued to the end of the movie, the audiences would remember that.

The two separate scripts still had to be combined into one, and that task was left to veteran screenwriter Sterling Silliphant, considered by many to be the best in the business. He found out early in the production that working with McQueen wasn't going to be easy.

The original script had the architect, Newman's role, with more lines of dialogue. When McQueen decided on the role of the fire chief and knew Newman was going to play the architect, he decided to test his power. He counted up the lines for both of the characters, that of the architect and the fire chief, and noticed that Newman would have twelve more lines of dialogue than he did. Steve wanted to surpass Newman on equal terms, both having the same amount of dialogue, both having an equal amount of screen time. He put in a call to Silliphant.

McQueen found out that Silliphant was on holiday, out at sea. Steve's determination was that of a bull. He couldn't wait until Silliphant got back. He made Fox executives call the writer back to shore to write twelve additional lines of dialogue for McQueen's character to make sure both stars had the same amount of lines. No more, no less. "Sterling was very pissed about that one," chuckled an executive for Fox.

McQueen was very cautious about the words he used on film. He liked to keep it simple. He felt he had an obligation to use words like the everyday man. He knew his appeal lay in that image. Sterling Silliphant described a scene with McQueen over the use of his dialogue:* "Steve wouldn't tell me what he didn't like about certain parts of the dialogue. He just said, 'I don't like that shit.' I kept confronting him about it. I said, 'That's not shit, it happens to be very brilliant. Tell me what you don't like.' Finally, he took me out in the hall and said, 'Look, I'm not an educated guy. I was a street kid. I did time. Okay, I can't say certain things . . . certain words I can't say. I have trouble with Zs and Ss . . . honestly, the dialogue is okay. I just can't say it.'" McQueen also had a problem saying the line "There are Ping-Pong balls in the back room that are combustible." Silliphant also offered, "Steve has the nagging instinct of what is right for him based on his ability. He doesn't like long speeches. He likes them to be terse, sharp, almost proverbial."

Director John Guillermin found McQueen a "pussycat" to work with. On their first meeting, McQueen came to Guillermin with an all-consuming problem. The helmet he was to wear in the film, he felt, made him look like an English bobby. "I look like an idiot!" he told the director. The night before filming, Guillermin had dinner with a fireman who was serving as a technical adviser. He spotted an old-style fire helmet sitting on the mantle and thought it perfect for Steve. "May I borrow this helmet for the movie?" he asked. Said Guillermin, "I brought it back to Steve and he put it on and liked the look. That was the biggest thing I ever did for him and he trusted me from that point on. Filming was a piece of cake."

The problem of billing still had to be dealt with. In recent years, ever since *The Great Escape*, it was Steve who had brought in the bigger box office dollars, but Newman had been around a little bit longer. The problem was solved when Freddie Fields brought up the idea of both names on the marquee. One would be on the left, one on the right, a little higher than the name on the left. Knowing that people read from left to right, McQueen opted for the name on the left. When the movie was released, it indeed appeared that Steve McQueen was its star.

* Litwak, Mark, *Real Power* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1986), 192.

In addition to McQueen and Newman, *The Towering Inferno* cast was to include William Holden, Faye Dunaway, Fred Astaire, Susan Blakely, Richard Chamberlain, Jennifer Jones, O. J. Simpson, Robert Wagner, and Robert Vaughn.

Though not billed, actor Felton Perry, a relative newcomer to films, had a moderate-size role as a firefighter. Perry remembers being star-struck on the set: "Here were all of these stars I used to watch when I was growing up and now I'm acting with them. Jennifer Jones, William Holden, Fred Astaire, Paul Newman, and Steve McQueen, who was my idol ever since *The Great Escape*." Perry would get a special kick whenever he passed his idol, who would greet him with a "Hiya, kid."

William Holden was particularly upset. He felt he should get top billing since he had been a star much longer than McQueen or Newman.

While on the set of *The Towering Inferno*, Holden repeatedly complained to his agent, "It's a lousy script. McQueen and Newman have all the action. I spend all of the time talking on the telephone."

Holden was also further miffed when actress Faye Dunaway made him wait two hours for a scene between the two of them. When Dunaway finally arrived, Holden took her by the shoulders and slammed her against the soundstage wall. "You do that to me once more and I'll push you through that wall."

Many wondered how McQueen and Newman would get along. "They acted like two old college buddies," notes costar Robert Vaughn. McQueen would often call Newman "Ol' Blue Eyes." He ribbed Newman: "You know, two Paul Newman autographs will get you one Steve McQueen autograph."

A constant theme in Neile's book was that Steve was in awe of Paul Newman. "That is not true," says Pat Johnson. "Steve wasn't in awe of anyone. It was Paul who was always coming over to Steve's trailer on the set. Not once did Steve go to see him." Says costar and friend Don Gordon, "I never knew Steve was in awe of Paul Newman. I think Steve liked him and admired him as an actor, as I do." Says an intimate of McQueen's, "Steve liked to give Paul a hard time. He would rag on Newman's wife [actress Joanne Woodward] because she was a real ball-buster. When Newman got in a motorcycle accident, she made him sell the bike. It was 'Paul fell off his bike and now he can't play anymore.' Steve had a good laugh over that one. McQueen did whatever, whenever he wanted."

Of all the actors he knew, McQueen was probably closest to Newman. When Paul Newman's son, Scott, overdosed on drugs a few years later, McQueen wanted to console Newman. "Something like that I can relate

to, and yet the best thing I can do for Paul is just to stay away, not even mention it." Pat Johnson interjected, "Well, Steve, there are probably not too many people he can talk to about it." Steve concluded, "Yeah, well, he knows that if he ever needs me to talk about it, I'm here."

Of the rest of the cast, McQueen said of Faye Dunaway, "The best actress I've ever worked with." On Richard Chamberlain, "He was a snob." McQueen didn't dislike Chamberlain, but was always a bit put off by the rumors that surrounded Chamberlain that he was gay. On Robert Vaughn, "Ever since *Ballist*, he was always a bit distant. I'm not sure if he's putting on airs now or what. He's not as friendly as he used to be." On Robert Wagner, "A good guy. A very good friend." On Fred Astaire, "The guy is one of the best athletes in the world."

For years, Steve had been performing a lot of his own stunts. His respect for Newman deepened even more when he discovered that Paul also performed a majority of his own stunts. Naturally, for *The Towering Inferno*, they both requested that there be no doubling for them. Producer Irwin Allen expressed his mixed emotions: "Both Steve and Paul insisted on being personally involved in scenes that placed them in the middle of the fire and the man-made flood we created in a desperate effort to put out the flames. As the action director, I was pleased by their willing cooperation. But as the producer, I was aware of the great risk and the fact that a single misstep could cause injury and shut down production if Steve or Paul became unavailable. I was very nervous until those scenes were completed."

One scene required that the fire chief, Steve, be dropped onto the roof of the skyscraper and into the middle of a lake of fire. The shot was going to be a close-up, so Steve insisted that he do the stunt. "Can't fake this one, Irwin," he said. Steve put on a flame-resistant suit and jumped fifteen feet out of a helicopter into the rooftop fire. But that was not to be his most dangerous stunt.

The climactic flood scene in the Promenade Room at the end of the picture proved to be the most dangerous. In the movie, in order to stop the blazing fire that has taken over a majority of the skyscraper, it is decided to completely deluge the building. Plastic explosives would be placed on the rooftop water storage tanks. A timer on the explosives would be triggered, causing the tanks to explode and sending the water down below to put out the fire.

Commented Irwin Allen, "Fire and water are the most unpredictable elements to work with in danger scenes. Once you let them go, they can't be recalled. And they're harder to control, too. We fired almost a million gallons of water at our performers, some of it shot from extreme

heights, some of it shot from water cannons, some hurled through high-pressure fire hoses."

Adds stunt coordinator Paul Stader, "When we flooded the nightclub, we faced the problem of nobody knowing just where the water would hit. The stars in the scene would have to take the full force of the tanks themselves. Most of the stuntmen and women had to find tables or other objects to hang onto in order to keep afloat." Stader admits that *The Towering Inferno* was the toughest assignment of his career.

Felton Perry remembers getting ready for the big scene. He looked over at McQueen. "He had this certain look on his face, like he's ready for anything. He looks over at me and says, 'Let's get to it.' And then the flood was turned loose."

"Our stars did their own stunts because the cameras were directly aimed at each one. McQueen, Newman, Holden, Astaire, Felton Perry, all of them. We built our set twenty-five feet off the ground so water would have some place to go after it hit. Otherwise, they all would have faced the possibility of drowning," said Allen. "There was no chance for a second shot because the set was destroyed by the deluge. In all my years of making movies, that was the most terrifying moment I have ever faced."

No stuntmen or women were hurt or burned throughout the whole movie.

The last scene of the film finds Paul Newman and Faye Dunaway reunited as lovers on the steps of the skyscraper that had claimed so many lives. McQueen slowly walks past the hallway where his brave firefighters are lined up in body bags. He makes his way to his car, but not before spotting Newman and Dunaway. The fire chief warns the architect, "You know, they'll keep building them higher and higher. And I'll keep eatin' smoke until one of you guys asks us how to build 'em." Looking over his shoulder, viewing the smoking ruins, Newman says, "Okay, I'm asking." McQueen responds, "You know where to find me. So long, architect." McQueen gets the last word.

The Towering Inferno took in \$55 million dollars in the U.S. alone, and over \$100 million worldwide, making it then the largest grossing film of all time.

The Towering Inferno has only three scenes in which McQueen and Newman interact. In those scenes, never has McQueen dominated the screen with such ease. Film historian Derek Elley noted, "McQueen dominates every scene. His performance is one of the most authoritative of his career. Once again, amid a starry cast, McQueen emerges as the outsider, existing within his own set of principles and beliefs."

Newman's fears dating back to *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* had

McQueen managed to dominate every scene with friendly rival Paul Newman in *The Towering Inferno*, 1974. McQueen earned a staggering \$12 million for this film, making him the world's highest paid movie star. (COURTESY OF TWENTIETH CENTURY-FOX/WARNER BROTHERS)



STEVE MCQUEEN

finally been realized. "It was strange," says James Coburn. "Newman was fearful of Steve in some way. The role of the architect was originally offered to Steve. Steve said, 'No, no. He's too vulnerable.' If you notice in the movie, it's the architect who makes the mistake and the fire chief who has the more dynamic role. He could put Newman down, which he probably loved." Said John Guillermin, "McQueen was inspired. I remember one scene in particular, where his character was talking to the fire chief and he just flopped in the corner. He said, 'My character has been fighting this fire all night and he's really tired by now.' So for that scene, he just sat in the corner and chose not to move, which gave the scene an unusual power. He had a sharp mind, he had the ability to put his finger on the very nerve of the scene—exhaustion." Newman may have had more range as an actor, but it is McQueen who emerges as the star of *The Towering Inferno*. And it is McQueen who became the undisputed king of Hollywood. He had no more worlds to conquer.

In October 1974, a fund-raiser was put together for actor James Stacy. Stacy was driving his motorcycle on Mulholland Drive when he crashed into another car. As a result of the accident, he lost an arm and a leg. He was to have been the next big movie star.

A benefit was arranged by Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis, Jr., Liza Minnelli, and Stacy's ex-wife, actress Connie Stevens, to help pay for his medical expenses. McQueen was asked to attend the black-tie affair.

MARSHALL TERRILL

Not one to socialize with the Hollywood crowd, Steve asked Pat Johnson and his wife, along with a then unknown Chuck Norris and his wife, to attend the event with him and Ali. "Everybody who was anybody in Hollywood was there," remembers Johnson. It was a black-tie affair, but McQueen showed up in a plaid Benetton lumberjack shirt, blue jeans, boots, and a long beard.

Not once during the event did McQueen get up. Instead, everybody in the room came over to greet him like he was royalty. Says Pat Johnson, "The cream of the crop from Hollywood came over to Steve to shake his hand. Clint Eastwood, John Lennon, Burt Reynolds, Carol Burnett, all came over to the table. It was like they were paying homage to him. They were all in awe of him. He was not in awe of anybody." And in his mind, Steve McQueen had finally made it to the top.

... AND OVER THE EDGE

People in Hollywood will hem and haw playin' all kinds of cute little games, and then you'll finally realize they want something from you. And eventually you'll have to ask, "You want something from me, don't you?"

STEVE McQUEEN

My dad reached a point in his life where he asked, "Is this all there is?"

CHAD McQUEEN

After The Towering Inferno, it was as if the effort to catch up to Paul Newman had tired him out.

NEILE McQUEEN

HE HAD SCALED THE HEIGHTS of superstardom and had remained there for over fifteen years. With each passing year, his popularity grew. At the age of forty-five, his star was brighter than ever. Then Steve McQueen took everyone by surprise—he dropped out of the race.

He appeared to have everything. He was Hollywood's biggest star. His wife was a beautiful and desirable woman. He had two great kids, and he was on friendly terms with his ex-wife.

Lurking behind the image of the celebrity who had everything, however, was a man in trouble. Steve had grown disillusioned—disillusioned with the movie industry, with his marriage to Ali, and with what the future held for him.

For years he had threatened to pack it all up and go far, far away. Right after *The Getaway*, he told a reporter, "I sometimes hate to go back to work. I want my life as simple as possible. I'm at an age where I'm not as ambitious as I used to be. I've been surrounded by a whirl of activity for a long time. I just want to be happy. I don't really care that

Woensdag 30 juli 2003

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Amerikaanse comedyserie.
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Amerikaanse filmkomedie
uit 1982 van Garry
Marshall. Met: Sean Young,
Michael McKean e.a.

life serie. 22.20 The towering inferno.
Amerikaanse drama/thriller
uit 1974 van John
Guillermin.

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01.15 Zendtijd: Sixpack.
01.35 Dead man's gun.
Amerikaanse westernserie.
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The towering inferno
(John Guillermin, Irwin Al-
len, 1974)

Op de bovenverdiepingen
van de hoogste wolken-
krabber ter wereld breekt
een brand uit. Met Steve
McQueen en Paul Newman.
Een van de betere rampen-
films. (V8, 22.20-01.15 uur)

**André Hazes: zij gelooft
in mij** (John Appel, 1999)

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