SHARK BAIT

WHEN SHE SKINNYDIPPED INTO THE JAWS OF DEATH, THE WORLD SCREAMED, SUSAN BACKLINIE REMEMBERS

BY RICHARD ROTHROCK

More than a seasoned stuntwoman, Susan Backlinie is a movie icon. Playing the beautiful Chrissie Watkins, in the opening of Steven Spielberg's JAWS (1975), she skinny-dips in the moonlit ocean while her inebriated lover struggles with his clothes on the beach. A couple of beats later, the great white shark savagely wrenches her beneath the calm surface to a violent death. Twenty years later, the scene unnerves audiences with the same timeless and visceral impact as Janet Leigh's watersoaked demise in PSYCHO.

Summer, 1974: En route to the JAWS location on Martha's Vineyard in the summer of 1974, there was only one concern on Backlinie's mind: director Steven Spielberg wasn't sure that she was qualified for the job. "He wanted an actress because there was a lot of acting involved, especially in conveying the terror," explains Backlinie, who was recommended by a water stunt specialist. But the producers, realizing the shoot could be physically perilous, resisted casting an actor who was untrained in stuntwork.

JAWS had been filming for a few months when the producers flew in Backlinie from a Canadian show. Interviewing her for the role, a glance at Backlinie's portfolio settled one nagging question. "I had a nude picture in it so the producers didn't make me get undressed," she relates. "It was the most proper interview for a position like that. The only thing they stressed was, 'We don't want you to get all the way out there, have you on the set, and say, 'Look, I don't really want to take my clothes off.'"

More than a pretty face, Backlinie tugged several years of stunt, animal and water work under her safety belt. A Washington D.C. native raised in Florida, she set state and national swimming records at high school and AAU competitions. After school, she was employed as an underwater mermaid in Florida's Weekee Wachee water show. Stints at Florida's Ivan Tors Studio and California's Africa USA prompted Backlinie to turn professional animal trainer, specializing in lions and tigers. Movie work soon followed. "Little tiny parts. Stunt doubling, parts here and there, fell in because of people I knew or had worked with before," says Backlinie.

Arriving at Martha's Vineyard, Backlinie initially found Spielberg "a little stand-offish. It made me feel real bad because they kind of forced me on him. But after I did my first scene, we got along wonderfully." That specific scene, where Chris-sie and her beau sprint from a beach party to an isolated patch of sand and water, was the only footage that Backlinie shot at night. The situation suited the stuntwoman, a shark aficionado since grade school, just fine. Unlike her luckless character, Backlinie had no desire to go into the water at night.

Chrissie's death was staged early in the morning. "We went out at first light every day because [Spielberg] wanted the light at a certain angle," recalls Backlinie, "so he could do day for night." She collaborated with the special effects crew on the technical problems of simulating a shark attack sans shark.

Backlinie nixed the original plan to attach her to an electric winch. As an alternative, she slipped into a pair of Bermuda shorts with metal appendages that are utilized for the illusion of flight within a studio. "They hooked me up to two wires that ran to two pilings 50 yards apart, then to the beach. I said, 'Let's just do it with manpower.' So we had five or six guys on each line and all they did was run back and forth on the beach. It wasn't that forceful, but I could feel when my hip would start to pull the other way. And I would violently throw my arms in the opposite direction. That's what gave it that real violent look."

Backlinie's mind focused not so much on recreating a
“A pretty girl torn apart by a shark is a lot more effective than having a flabby guy torn up. Women aren’t exploited as much as they think they are.”

Backlinie usually wrapped for the day by 10 each morning and soaked herself in a hot bath. “Even though it was summer, [the bouyancy and I had fins on. Steven wanted me as high out of the water as I could be, so I was fighting those cables all the time.

“I don’t think anybody on the set had any idea [JAWS] was going to come off big. In fact, a lot of the people were tired and starting to flake out. They had done all the land shots and hadn’t even had the shark in the water yet. Everybody wondered whether the shark was going to work. Could it do everything they said it would?”

Backlinie’s fatal encounter with the great white (right) was telegraphed, internationally, on posters adhering to Universal’s campaign art (above).

shark attack, but avoiding one. “I knew floundering around, starting and stopping and starting and stopping, is one thing that really calls sharks in. To avoid possible danger, Backlinie rigged her wire with releases so she could quickly extricate herself from any difficulty. Not that she was alone in the aquatic environment: “Steven was in the water all the time. The cameraman was in the water. The camera crew was in the water. So people were right there had I gotten in trouble.” Spielberg insisted the attack be “as violent as it could possibly be” and Backlinie, though not an actress, had no problem communicating Chrissie’s terror.

“Oriented to the water as much as I was,” she gulps, “I can’t think of anything more terrible than getting attacked by a shark.”

As the cameras rolled and the crew dragged Backlinie back and forth through the chilly Atlantic, much of her energy “was spent kicking to keep my body above the surface. When you pull like that, it has a tendency to pull you under. I put on a pair of wet suit bottoms which gave me a little ocean] was really cold. All the guys had wet suits on, but I got extremely cold,” she laughs while recalling the fish bowl atmosphere of Martha’s Vineyard. “You’re filming on an island in the middle of summer with six million people there. The girl-to-guy ratio must have been ten to one. I couldn’t figure out how the crew ever got the movie done with that many girls around. You couldn’t leave a man alone for a minute and there were ten girls on him. Unbelievable!”

During a break in production, Backlinie inspected the film’s mechanical star. “I went under it,” she smiles, “and there was all this shining metal—bronze and brass and stainless steel. I’m a boat person and all boats have zinc plates on them,” which prevent electrolysis, the breakdown of metals in salt water. “And I looked at it and thought, ‘Wow, all this metal going in the ocean.’ After it had been in the water a day, they had zinc plates all over it. It was a beautiful job, and it took a lot to keep that shark in shape. They had a crew going all night.”

Backlinie’s most embarrassing moment transpired when, before being dragged down for the last time, her character frantically hangs on to a buoy; the script required her to recite the Lord’s Prayer. “I’m Catholic, but I don’t practice as much as I should,” she confesses. “The crew wasn’t much help, either. All those guys, and we couldn’t come up with it. I guess it shows we don’t go to church much. I ended up screaming a different line.

Backlinie’s shoot stretched to two weeks. “Spielberg,” she recalls, “did my routine so many times, the producers finally called and said, ‘You’ve got enough footage. Send her home.’” But she was back in the water only a couple of months later “to shoot the underwater shots, from the shark’s point of

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proved irresistible; Backlinie, and her husband at the time, had long speculated about the voyage. "A time came in our life when we had a boat. We were not working anymore and we said, 'If we don't do it now, we never will.' People spend all their lives saying they're going to go cruising. The hardest thing to do is untie those dock lines."

Departing California, they spent a year in Hawaii and later sailed to American Samoa, Tonga and Fiji. "I spent five years in Australia, which was wonderful," smiles Backlinie. "And I spent nine months on this Malay island in the middle of the Indian Ocean. We ran a little place whose family ancestor had found the island and started coconut groves."

After returning home, she travelled to Hollywood again to assist in the construction of a catamaran. "We delivered it halfway around the world again via South Africa. En route, Backlinie visited "out of the way" locations including barren St. Helena, where an exiled Napoleon spent the remainder of his life after Waterloo. "You can get to it only by boat," she says, "because there's no place on the island flat enough to land a plane."

Setting back in America, Backlinie has worked in various capacities, including time as a diving instructor on a California boat. Wherever she goes, "You of summer, and lay there and never get cold."

Proud of her accomplishments, she relishes the occasional recognition but hardly regrets not being a celebrity—"I'm too much of a free spirit not to be able to go down to the corner grocery store."