



# Camera Adventures with *Magnum, P.I.* <sup>(TV)</sup>

by Nora Lee

Thomas Magnum's adventures as a P.I. — *that's private investigator* — were chronicled by several cameramen, but for the last three-and-a-half years of the series, John C. Flinn, III, ASC was behind that camera making memorable television. This year Flinn was nominated for an Emmy for his work on the segment titled "Unfinished Business."

One look at Flinn and you can't help thinking he's really Selleck's double, not his D.P. — *that's director of photography!* He's definitely got a Selleck look, right down to the mustache. That probably explains why he got started in the motion picture business as an actor in 1964. Between takes, he found himself drawn to the camera and he started watching what the crew did and how they did it. He got work as an actor on such shows as

*Get Smart* and *Gunsmoke*. In a bizarre twist, he later worked camera crew on those same shows.

Bill Widemeyer, head of the camera department at Columbia, gave Flinn his first shot as a second assistant. As Flinn puts it, "Ever since then I've been on the road." He rose through the ranks under the tutelage of such cameramen as William Fraker, ASC, Robert Morrison, Richard Rawlings, Sr., ASC, Ted Voigtlander, ASC, Robert Surtees, ASC and Monroe Askins, Sr., ASC, to name only a few.

Flinn moved up to director of photography on a Movie of the Week called *The Flame is Love*, which he shot on location in Ireland. Since then his credits have included the last season of *Hawaii Five-0*, three years with *Hill Street Blues*, many MOWs and *Magnum*.

*P.I.* A life in the "industry" was probably inevitable. It's in his genes. His grandfather, John Flinn Sr., was vice president of Cecil B. DeMille Studios and his father, John Flinn Jr., served as director of publicity and advertising at Columbia Studios for 25 years.

Sometimes talking to Flinn seems like talking to the Hawaiian Chamber of Commerce. Other times it seems like talking to Tom Selleck's press agent. But in both cases Flinn is sincere. He really enjoyed the time he spent in the islands and more than that, he loved working with the people involved in *Magnum, P.I.* — Selleck not the least among them. "Tom Selleck is a treat. He is a professional and he made it very pleasant to work on his show. When he became producer, I saw it as a real advantage to me. He was very interested

in the look we were trying to get – that special look for that special show. We never wanted to look the same twice. He understood that,” explained Flinn.

What’s it really like to shoot six days a week on a top-rated series for three and a half years? Flinn thought “it was paradise.” Perhaps, but it was also a lot of work. Hawaii isn’t Hollywood and there isn’t the endless array of support personnel just a phone call away. Stage One, on the island of Oahu, was the first and only sound stage to which the company had access. “We packed a lot into our one little stage. When we could, of course, we used local interiors and sometimes, when we couldn’t tie a place up for as long as we wanted, our guys would build a reasonable copy of it and we continued shooting on stage,” Flinn explained.

Stage One was home to the interior of Magnum’s guest house and the interior of the Robin Masters estate. It also was home to the mock-up of T.C.’s helicopter, an occasional boat, and anything else that was needed and unavailable on location. Each show had a higher-than-average shooting schedule of eight or nine days. Said Flinn, “Most of the extra time was because of weather. We never knew what the weather would do and there were times we would be in the middle of shooting some place and it would be absolutely beautiful. Suddenly, it would just start pouring. We stayed on one location for three hours once, waiting for the rain to stop. We were stuck. We didn’t have any of our interior sets ready, so we had to wait it out. It did get beautiful again and we finished our day’s work. That kind of situation would drive a lot of producers and production managers crazy.”

But Flinn had only kind words for the producing team on *Magnum*, especially supervising producer Chris Abbott and co-exec Charles Johnson. Prior planning is essential to a smooth operation of a weekly television show and the producers included Flinn in pre-production meetings and actively sought his input.

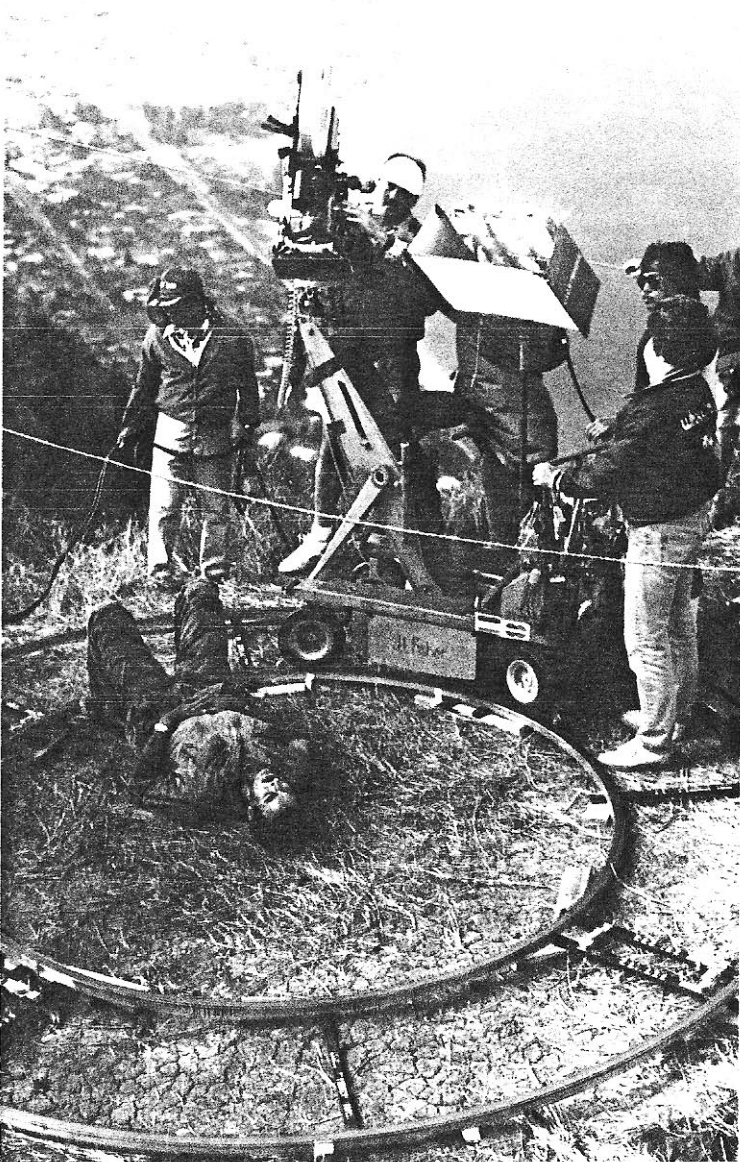
Because Flinn and his crew were so far away from the nearest rental house, he chose his camera package and film stock



with care. “I always use Panavision cameras – Panaflex, PanaX and PanArri – and I used Eastman film. I always have since I became a director of photography. I switched off between 5247 rated at about 64 and 94 with an ASA of 800 and 250. I used all Panavision lenses. I like the 5-to-1 zoom and used it a lot. I also like flat lenses. We used a whole range of them from a 14 or a 17 to a 4-inch flat lens.

“On the B camera we often used a 25-to-250mm lens. I would trade off between flat and zoom. I don’t like the look of a

**Opposite page:**  
Crew works around the famous ‘McMasters Estate.’ Above left: Flinn. Below: Selleck is the center of attention surrounded by crew members Herb Furuya, Michael Pang and Bill Witthans.



Top: Magnum crew sets up for a romantic shot using shiny board and water reflections. Selleck stand-in at far right. Below: Crew members Doug Olivares, Denny Hall, Witthans, Rick DiNieri, Skip Burnham and David Ahuna, with Flinn at the camera, try to keep it out of the water.



straight zoom. We tried to make our movements smooth and steady. The less aware of the camera you are, the better I've done my job. I want things to flow with feeling. I want the actors to tell the story, not the camera. That's my philosophy."

As a result of the isolation Flinn relied heavily on his crew's loyalty and their ability to work as a team — always one step ahead of the rest of the company. Perhaps for him, the most important part of his tenure on Magnum was "working with a crew that cared."

"It's hard to believe what a family our crew was," Flinn emphasized. "Not just the camera crew. For example our greensman, Clarence Maki, was terrific. He

knew that I loved pretty, colorful flowers and he understood how they could enhance a room or even an exterior. And those times of the year when things weren't really blossomed out in an exterior, he would add just the right touch. He would come to me and tell me what I wanted. He knew. He knew me that well. The island is so green that I liked to bring in reds and pinks and blues. He understood that."

He continued, "Because I was doing the shows back-to-back I had to depend on my two best boys, Doug Downworth and Pat Murray. They would go out location scouting with the director of the next episode while I was finishing up the current one. That kept us

rolling pretty good. They knew my style and my ways. They would come back with pictures of the location and a diagram. We would know in advance what time of day we would be shooting. With the diagrams, I could lay out my rigging. That way we could go right from the stage to location and be ready to shoot. It was just a matter of plugging in.

"We had to keep moving. It was a tight schedule. And because of the size of our production we didn't have time to play around or experiment much — we had to go," said Flinn. One way to add speed and efficiency to a crew is to have a telepathic gaffer. "Bobby Chaldu and I have been together since *Hill Street Blues*. He knows me like a book and he and I look at each other after a rehearsal and shake our heads and do it. He knows what I mean when I say 'Let's give it a little more there... and a little oompf over there... and I want it down in there.'"

One of the little joys of returning to Hawaii to shoot *Magnum* was meeting up with old crew members from *Hawaii Five-O* days. Among them was David Ahuna, Flinn's key grip. "There were quite a few of the local guys that I had worked with before and it was just like old times," said Flinn.

One absolutely indispensable part of his crew was his dolly grip, Bill Witthans, and his faithful dolly. "We did use a lot of dolly track on the show. Quite often we'd use both cameras on dollies at the same time. Something like that has to fit the rhythm of the scene. We even used them going in two different directions. It was a fast-paced show and the dolly made it easier to keep things moving. What we lacked over there was a crane. We couldn't get one over from the mainland for just one or two shows because of the expense. That would have been a luxury. The things I could have done...."

The two men closest to Flinn were his operator, Pat McGinness, and his first assistant Denny Hall. Flinn has known McGinness since his days on *Hill Street*. He

began as a second assistant with Flinn and two years ago, while on Magnum, McGinness became his operator. "Pat has a good eye. He works with me on my compositions and once we're rolling, he makes sure it's all there," Flinn said.

Assistant cameraman Hall had the dual responsibility for the equipment and the second assistant and the first assistant on the second camera. "We have an unbelievable amount of equipment and if something breaks down, we aren't five minutes away from Hollywood. It's his responsibility to keep everything running in tip-top shape. Sometimes it seemed like a thankless task to him, but never to me," said Flinn.

The crew for *Magnum, P.I.* couldn't be complete without a helicopter pilot. "We did our own aerials. Our pilot, Steve Kux, was one of the best pilots I have ever worked with. He could make moves with that helicopter that dolly grips would be proud of. He thought like a cameraman. He would hover about 20 feet over a two-shot and he could feather that helicopter back and reveal cliffsides and an ocean just as smooth as if he was on wheels - it's pretty dramatic. He's a perfectionist and he knew when a move didn't work.

"We used a Tyler mount in the helicopter and a lot of times we hand-held. Sometimes that was faster and easier - for instance, when we wanted to shoot through the bubble to simulate the actor's POV. A hand-held shot made it seem more real. We could include a hand or foot in the shot and it would cut better with the helicopter shots we did on stage with our actors."

*Magnum, P.I.* gave Flinn an opportunity to use everything he had ever learned about lighting and to invent a few tricks of his own. Hardly a week went by without breathtaking helicopter shots, stunt work, or car chases. At the same time there were tender moments, dramatic climaxes, comedy relief and even a sultry sex scene or two. Flinn enjoyed the challenge, but in his words, "a challenge is

merely an opportunity...."

The harsh tropical light was a real opportunity!

Flinn gave most of the credit for the Hawaiian exteriors to Mother Nature. "Shooting exteriors in Hawaii - it's pretty hard to miss. It's so beautiful there. Sometimes we don't want it beautiful and it's hard to tone it down. Other times we have to enhance the light, because not every day is a beautiful sunny day. I know, it's hard to believe, but it's true. We might be stuck with two overcast days in a row. And the scenes we shot two days before have to match what we're doing now. It took a lot of tricks and fooling sometimes, but we got it done.

"The problem is tropical light is a lot hotter than light here in the L.A. area. The intensity of light in Hawaii is at least 1.5 times what it is here. We haven't got a natural filter in Hawaii. We don't have haze or smog to help balance the light. It's so harsh that to balance skin tones and keep from burning up actors' faces, we have to use a lot of silks and doubles. Sometimes we've covered a courtyard that's 40 x 40 with a silk to cut down the light. You have to be aware that the contrast can be tremendous. And you can't necessarily balance to the background," he explained.

"A lot of times I will use a 216 silk on an arc and use that as a soft key on exteriors. The important thing is to get the light as soft as I can get it so the actors don't have to squint and yet try and balance to the background. There have been times when I have put a net behind the actors to cut down the background."

In the tradition of cinematographers from the Golden Age, Flinn is particularly careful with the women he photographs. "I always use silks to keep their eyes from turning into dark circles and to eliminate hard shadows. I do use filters - I vary from very fine nets to corals to fogs and double fogs. With ladies I often use Mitchell diffusion. I like to assure them going in that they won't have to worry about how they look. I love to pho-

tograph women and I want them to look right."

Still Flinn isn't convinced that there is a specific style that he can identify in his work. "I think I have a style, but I don't know how to explain it. I don't like to repeat the same look. My style changed with each segment. This is hard for me to explain, I tend to work from a feeling... for example, a lot of *Magnum* was light comedy and my style would reflect that - we made it bright and happy. When we had dramatic scenes, that's when I really had fun. I could introduce a dramatic look with my choice of lights.

"I love lighting for the mood. Let's say we're in the kitchen and it's bright and cheery and then there's a phone call. Thomas goes out of the kitchen. It's late afternoon. There are streaks on the wall as the light comes in the window. The phone call brings Thomas down. It's an upsetting situation. Let's say he's walking with the phone and all of a sudden he walks out of the light. I'll let him go dark. I just let it play. So in one little sequence we've gone from happy to very dramatic."

Flinn's experiences as an actor have helped as a director of photography. He understands the insecurities and feeling of helplessness that can wash over you when you are in front of a camera. His style of lighting for a feeling or mood seems to help the actors get into their roles. "I want to do what I can to help him or her to really feel good about what they're doing. I want to let them know that I know what it's like to be out there and that I'm there for them. So I take it as a compliment when the actors tell me that the set looks just like they thought it would."

After three and a half years - 66 episodes - there were some moments that stuck out as small triumphs in the weekly rush to get a show on the air. Flinn talked about how he met some of the daily "opportunities":

"For one episode we recreated a Viet Cong camp on the little back lot of our one little stage.

We were stuck on the set because of the weather. Thomas was after the guy who set up the death of his wife and daughter. We had to do a flashback sequence with a POW. It was supposed to be really hot in the jungle, so we had a very hot light (500 footcandles) coming in through the doors and a really low light (20 footcandles) on in the interior of this hut. Everybody thought it was an exterior shot. It's great to be able to say it was all done on the stage!"

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Then there was the show Flinn filmed at sea. "We spent 8 days on the *S.S. Constitution*, a Navy aircraft carrier. We scouted the ship before going out so the crew would know what we were up against. We took quite a bit of dolly track and used a lot of hand held cameras. For the gentlemen on the crew who had never had this kind of experience, it was very exciting. I wouldn't want to do it all the time. We had a very high budget for Dramamine."

And as a salute to the Western — "We did one two-hour special on the big island. It was a cowboy show and we had a lot of fun with that one. It brought back memories of *Gunsmoke*. I love Westerns. And if there could ever be another John Wayne, his name is Tom Selleck. He prepares himself so well for everything he does. The guy can ride a horse like you can't believe!"

Perhaps one of the very best episodes was called "Going Home," directed by Harry Harris. In it Magnum goes back to Virginia for the funeral of his grandfather. One of Flinn's best illusions was creating Virginia in Hawaii. "There

were only a few second-unit shots of driving down the streets of the town that were actually done in Virginia. We found a colonial style house in Hawaii that didn't have a palm tree in the front yard, which was tough. It came in very handy to have a greensman who knew which plants were Hawaiian and which plants were Virginian."

Then there was the fun factor. From Flinn's description it was very high. For instance, though Flinn blushes when it's mentioned, there was an episode where Thomas was involved with a hooker. Her pimp's name? The Mighty Flinn. "What could I do?" said Flinn redfaced. "I tried to pay them money to get it out of the script! It ruined my career. I was stuck. But for the record, *there is no truth to it*. Believe me! I did receive cards and letters on that episode..."

"Things like that happened on our show a lot. Thomas is one of the funniest guys you could ever know. For instance there was a scene between Magnum and Higgins and Thomas was outside in the hall. Thomas would knock on the door and when Higgins opened it, Thomas was nowhere to be found or he'd be on his knees — with his knees in his shoes — looking like a midget!"

And finally, on *Magnum*, Flinn was given the opportunity to direct. He did quite a lot of second-unit direction plus directing two complete episodes. One episode opened the final season and he was able to work with one of his former mentors, Richard Rawlings, Sr., as his director of photography. Flinn, then, has had the unusual opportunity to view the world of television from in front of the camera, behind the camera and beside the camera. He is currently completing work on a new *MOW*, *Police Story*, but it will be hard to top his experiences in paradise, just as it was hard to say good-bye when the last episode of *Magnum* wrapped.

John Flinn was spoiled and he knows it, "What can I say? It was the time of my life." △