



## **“Aliens” (1986) – Superior Sequel to the Original Source**

Retrospective by Dr. John L. Flynn

### **Introduction**

At first glance, the notion of a sequel to “Alien” (1979) must have seemed like such a forgone conclusion. Next to “Star Wars” (1977) and “Close Encounters of the Third Kind” (1977), Ridley Scott’s stylish thriller had been one of the most popular films of the decade. But in the six years since its release, the motion picture had also spawned a rash of forgettable clones. And in a period filled with sequels to almost every successful and popular Hollywood movie that rarely succeeded on their own merit as original entertainment, the new production appeared to be more of a tremendous gamble than a

sure thing. Besides the challenge to bring something familiar and new under budget and on time to the screen, the project also had to deal with its share of preconceptions.

The most obvious problem writer and director James Cameron faced in developing a sequel to “Alien,” he said, was, “How do you beat a classic? You really have to dig deep into the bag of tricks and come up with some good ideas. And you have to do a proper homage to the original without being a mindless fan, something which is a piece of entertainment and a story in its own right.”

### **Spawning the Sequel**

In the wake of “Alien’s” success, many similar films soon began appearing at the local multi-plex. Just as it had been influenced by low budget science fiction films of the Fifties and Sixties, like “It! The Terror from Beyond Space” (1958) and “Planet of the Vampires” (1965), the critically-acclaimed motion picture inspired its own collection of imitators, including “Inseminoid” (1980), ‘The Creature Wasn’t Nice” (1981), “Galaxina” (1981), “Galaxy of Terror” (1981) and many others. Most of those productions failed to generate any popular enthusiasm, and quickly died at the box office. Ridley Scott’s stylish thriller and audience favorite, considered by many as a classic of the science fiction genre, had seemingly captured magic in a bottle. Executives at Twentieth Century-Fox were doubtful that task could again be accomplished, in light of the failure of numerous ripoffs and spoofs, and dismissed a sequel as an unrealistic option.

The partners at Brandywine Productions disagreed, and had faith that a sequel would eventually be made under their production banner. Three years after the release of “Alien,” writer-director Walter Hill, producer Gordon Carroll and writer David Giler held

a conference at their offices on the lot at Twentieth Century-Fox to discuss the possibilities of a sequel. They all agreed that a fresh approach was clearly necessary if audiences were going to accept a follow-up, but none of them could agree what approach to take with the new film. After all, there were so many questions still left unanswered from the first film. Questions, like “Would Ripley safely make it back to Earth?” “Would her story be believed by her superiors?” “Would they then launch an investigation?” “And what about all those Alien eggs waiting to hatch their parasites in the cargo hold of the derelict ship?,” continued to bother each of them. They reasoned that a continuation of the story would have to answer many of those questions, while at the same time being completely different in order to avoid simply rehashing the events of the first film.

Late in the fall of 1983, Brandywine Productions began considering applicants for writer and director of its next major project. Their decision to rework “Spartacus” with a science fiction setting, though hardly original, was the kind of high concept that Twentieth Century-Fox was willing to invest huge production dollars. The only drawback the partners faced was finding the right individual to pull the project together. Walter Hill briefly considered directing the film himself, but later withdrew his nomination for the less conventional “Streets of Fire” (1984). Both he and David Giler had been impressed with the script for “The Terminator” (1984), and while that particular project had already been optioned by Hemdale (in association with Orion Pictures and HBO Entertainment), they felt its author possessed the kind of raw talent needed for their new film. They consequently met with James Cameron to discuss his participation. Even though he declined, freely expressing his major concerns about their idea, the producers

were impressed enough to present the young filmmaker with a unique proposition, the idea of doing a sequel to “Alien.”

“All they said was, ‘Ripley and soldiers,’” James Cameron fondly remembered his first meeting with executive producers Walter Hill and David Giler. “They didn’t really give me anything specific—just this idea of getting her together with some military types and having them all go back to the planet.”

### **Enter James Cameron**

James Cameron began learning cinematic storytelling techniques at the age of twelve when he first started drawing comic books. By designing each comic book literally frame for frame, with closeups, medium and wide shots, he taught himself the basics of visual narrative. Even though Jim always dreamed of becoming a professional comic-book artist, he eventually set all that aside to work at World Pictures. (Cameron readily credits his development as a filmmaker to Corman, the legendary entrepreneur who produced hundreds of successful low-budget films in the late fifties and sixties from his basement.) While working for New World Pictures, Jim not only learned the pragmatic side of filmmaking, including the importance of efficiency and budgetary control, but also developed skills in art direction, special effects, and photography while working on “Galaxy of Terror” (1980). Of course, Cameron’s “The Terminator” (1984) would forever solidify his reputation as a filmmaker.

“I was writing ‘Rambo’ at the time, and I was getting into the whole Vietnam thing, and it occurred to me that ‘grunts in space’ was a wonderful concept,” Jim explained his reaction to the original concept for “Alien II.” “There’s a whole list of science fiction going back to the twenties that explores the idea of military in space, but it

hadn't really been done in film. So I took that idea and all the elements from the first film that I like and thought would be worth retaining, and from there the story crystallized very quickly—in about two days as a matter of fact. I just sort of sat down and drank a lot of coffee and wrote a treatment.”

### **The Original Screen Treatment**

James Cameron's original story—a forty-five page treatment, with notes on characters and effects, entitled “Alien II”—was submitted to the partners at Brandywine Productions on September 21, 1983. Although similar to the final film, several concepts in the original were altered or dropped from the latter drafts of the script. The most discernible difference was in the extensive background of the characters. Early in his development of the story, Cameron concluded that the first and most essential element was the central character of Ripley. If the sequel was to succeed, she would have to remain as the emotional core of the piece. He was determined to bring Sigourney Weaver back to reprise her role, and knew that the actress would agree only if Ripley's character had been expanded beyond the anonymity of the first film. He spent a great deal of time detailing the Warrant Officer, by creating a past history and defining her motivations. According to his original notes, Ripley is a divorced mother with a young daughter who lives with the child's father. She promised to be with “Amanda” on her twelfth birthday; but Ripley learns, upon her fifty-seven year return to earth, that Amy is now a bitter old woman who accuses her mother of abandoning her. That element of guilt, coupled with her recurring nightmares about the alien, provides Ripley with the reason for going back.

Perhaps most crucial in Cameron's early draft was the introduction of Anne and Russ Jorden (who are the parents of Rebecca, “Newt”). Under orders from the Weyland-

Yutani corporation, these two colonists investigate coordinates on the planetoid of Acheron (later changed to LV-426) that Ripley has provided for the derelict spaceship. Their discovery of the egg chamber re-introduces the threat from the first film. First, Russ Jorden is infected with the alien parasite, then a handful of rescuers, and finally the whole colony. Unfortunately, their pivotal roles were later reduced in subsequent drafts and completely eliminated from the final film. [During the painstakingly complex reconstruction of the film on laserdisc, the Jorden Family scenes were restored.]

Cameron also applied the knowledge he had gained through his research on “Rambo” and his interest in the Vietnam War to create a collection of hardened yet believable soldiers. His Colonial Marines, including Hicks, Hudson, Vasquez, Frost, Apone, Drake, Dietrich and the others, remain largely unchanged from the original treatment to the final script. Jim’s rough notes, however, featured Lieutenant Gorman as the nominal villain. Carter Burke was not even introduced, and most of his early scenes were assigned to Dr. O’Niel (who does not join Ripley on the journey), with Gorman (in a state of panic) committing the acts of betrayal in the later scenes. The android Bishop was modeled on the character of Ash (from the first film) but changed in subsequent drafts. Because Bishop is merely a machine (and can’t act with self-determination), his basic programming threatens the safety of the mission. At one point in the treatment, he is given a direct order from Ripley and Hicks to pilot the second “drop” ship to the surface in order to rescue them. But the ship’s computer has issued a “quarantine command” for the entire planetoid, and he is unable to land. (Ripley is then forced to locate the colonists’ shuttle, and pilot the craft to safety herself.)

Other changes in the story offer interesting variations on the plot. Master Sergeant Apone is not killed during the attack at the processing center, but rather stung and paralyzed by an alien stinger. The others are forced to carry his body back to the infirmary, where Ripley (not Bishop) deduces the alien community is constructed like an insect hive with warriors, workers and a queen. Late in the story, after Bishop has disobeyed the direct order to land the rescue ship, Ripley and the marines begin looking for the evacuation shuttle. Newt is separated from the group during a pitched battle, and both Ripley and Hicks are captured and cocooned. Ripley manages to get free but has only enough time to save the little girl or the injured corporal. She opts for the little girl, and reluctantly leaves Hicks behind.

Cameron's original story treatment, though impressive to Carroll, Hill and Giler, was little more than a reworking of Robert A. Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* (1959), with elements of Joe Haldeman's *Forever War* (1974) added for good measure. One of science-fiction literature's most widely read classics, Heinlein's story follows the exploits of an elite group of soldiers in their battle with a race of large insect-like aliens (which they dub "Bugs"). Their combat is called a "bug-hunt" because the troopers are often forced to hunt down the loathsome creatures, which number in the hundreds, in a complex series of mazes and underground tunnels. At the lowest level, the soldiers discover "the queens . . . obscene monsters larger than a horse and utterly immobile." Heinlein equips his troopers with "powered battle suits" so that they can match the awesome strength of the aliens. His narrator describes the battle armour: "Two thousand pounds of it, maybe, in full kit . . . you look like a big steel gorilla, armed with gorilla-sized weapons. The suit has feedback which causes it to match any motion you make,

exactly—but with great force.” The soldiers must also endure the “drop,” a harrowing free-fall in tiny capsules from the infantry mothership to the planet below. Similar elements from Haldeman’s story, not the least of which is the notion of time dilation during hypersleep travel, also seemed to find their way into the treatment.

### **The First Draft Screenplay**

The basic story for “Aliens,” as originally conceived by James Cameron prior to his work on “The Terminator,” only later evolved, after numerous revisions and rewrites, into the blueprint for the highly successful film. While the similarities to *Starship Troopers* and *The Forever War* remained, other concepts needed reworking. But Hill and Giler had been impressed enough by his forty-five page treatment to give Cameron approval to continue. Almost two years after the completion of the treatment, he turned the first draft screenplay into Brandywine Productions on February 28, 1985. David Giler and Gordon Carroll reviewed the draft, and suggested that certain elements be changed. Cameron submitted a revised screenplay several weeks later. Within a month, Twentieth Century-Fox had approved his script and preproduction began on the expensive sequel.

Surprisingly similar to the final version, the first draft screenplay added a couple of new sequences and deleted a few others. The most dramatic inclusion was the introduction of Carter Burke, the company man who first befriends then later betrays Ripley. His presence in the script filled the void left by Ash (in the first film) and added an important subplot that would function as a catalyst for conflict when the aliens were offscreen. Most of the scenes featuring Dr. O’Niel at Earth Satellite Station Beta (changed to Gateway Station in the final film) were simply rewritten for him; other scenes portraying Lieutenant Gorman as the nominal villain were also revised for Burke.



A major sequence, towards the end of the story, was also written (but never filmed) which detailed his tragic demise. While Ripley is searching for Newt in the bowels of the power station, she encounters Burke trapped in the alien's cocoon. He begs her for mercy, and Ripley obliges by handing him a grenade, saying, "No one should have to die that way." Burke's inclusion added dimension to the story, and gave the classic B-movie plot a sense of purpose and theme.

The second, most important change in the script dealt with the Bishop's characterization. Originally, Cameron had envisioned Bishop as a mere extension of the starship's computer systems, unable to act with self-determination. But soon the young filmmaker realized that not only was his android too much like Ash but he had resolved the issue of company treachery in a far more interesting and dramatic manner (with the inclusion of Burke). Bishop could now be completely reworked. Jim created an elaborate back story to explain the evolution of artificial intelligence. He even invented a company name, Hyperdyne Systems (a subtle homage to Cyberdyne Systems Corporation, which builds his "terminators"), and made the newer models—like Bishop—subservient to Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics. Not only was the character completely overhauled but he was also given several key scenes, including a harrowing encounter with aliens. While crawling along the tunnel on the way to align the colony's antenna, Bishop is attacked by several warrior aliens.

Other scenes and snatches of dialogue, which helped to further detail the story, included an extension of Ripley's briefing with the Marines, additional speculation about the alien queen, an exchange between Ripley and Newt about the Warrant Officer's daughter and the origin of babies, and a futuristic shower sequence aboard the Sulaco.

Cameron also placed thirty atmosphere processors (up from twelve in the treatment) around the planetoid, and extended the range of the colonial terraformers. Further refinements also molded the potentially anonymous group of soldiers into very real individuals.

Highly original and remarkably sophisticated from a technological point of view, James Cameron's first draft screenplay still needed some polish. More changes were insisted upon by Hill and Giler before the script could go before the camera. Descriptions of action and dialogue were either shortened or tightened, and some scenes were completely rewritten from scratch. Other sequences were simply dropped. The final shooting script, which ran some 154 minutes in length, was delivered to Brandywine Productions on May 30, 1985.

### **Brandywine Considers**

James Cameron's final shooting script was viewed by Walter Hill and David Giler as a worthy successor to the honored original. Even though he had moved the action from the claustrophobic interiors of a space ship to the wide open battlefield of the colony base, Cameron had still maintained the relentless death-struggle between a small group of rugged individuals and a cosmic creature. He had also centered the action around the nominal "hero" of the first film. But Hill and Giler knew that his screenplay was more than simply a logical extension of "Alien." By expanding the role of Ripley and delving deeper into her background, Cameron had created a believable character who would engage a potential audience's sympathy and goodwill. Only reluctantly does Ripley first decide to confront her demons by going on the expedition then later choose to take command of the squad. As portrayed by Jim Cameron, she is clearly not a female Rambo

but merely a victim of extraordinary circumstances. Her “masculine” strength and assertiveness are soon tempered by a maternal devotion to Newt, who like herself is a survivor. In comforting and protecting the little girl, Ripley also overcomes the guilt she feels having abandoned her daughter. The partners at Brandywine Productions knew these elements combined to make their new project a winner. Sigourney Weaver was equally impressed with the story, and agreed to play Ripley a second time. With her involvement in the project secure, Twentieth Century-Fox gave Brandywine its final approval and preproduction began.

### **The Production Staff**

Once the script had been approved, and the title of the film had changed from “Alien II” to “Aliens,” James Cameron knew his selection of the right production team was crucial to the success of the film. Walter Hill, David Giler and Gordon Carroll had decided to act as executive producers rather than producers (as in the first film), and that left Cameron free to bring in his own producer. Even though he had worked with a handful of very successful producers over the years, his collaborative experience on “The Terminator” (1984) revealed that there was only one person for the position—Gale Anne Hurd, a woman he had worked with during the early Corman years. Hurd, a graduate of the Stanford University with a combined degree in communications and economics, had worked with Cameron at Roger Corman’s New World Pictures. She later co-wrote and produced “The Terminator,” turning a modest little thriller into one of the year’s ten best motion pictures. She married James Cameron during the production of “Aliens,” and helped him launch his next major project, “The Abyss” (1989), before embarking upon a successful producing career of her own.

Among the people returning from the first film were several very familiar faces. Adrian Biddle, who had worked as a focus puller on “Alien,” had become a first rate cinematographer in the intervening seven years. The former clapper-loader for Ridley Scott Associates had earned quite a reputation as a director of photography in England, and he was Jim Cameron’s first choice. Crispian Sallis, who had been a trainee of Les Dilley, Roger Christian and Ian Whittaker in the art department on “Alien,” had gone onto become a seasoned set decorator. His impressive skills were called upon to decorate both the Gateway Station’s medical lab and the huge colony complex. And finally Ron Cobb, who had produced literally hundreds of sketches for the first film, seemed like the ideal choice to produce a number of important designs. The former political cartoonist had become one of the most sought after art designers since his work on “Alien.” He had contributed sketches to “Raiders of the Lost Ark” (1981), and later headed the art departments for “Conan the Barbarian” (1982) and “The Last Starfighter” (1984). He was initially hired by Gale Anne Hurd to help Cameron (during the early stages) brainstorm many of the film’s key sequences, then kept on as one of the two principal designers.

Since political cartoonist Ron Cobb had already been familiar with the world of “Alien,” he was assigned the task of designing the colony of LV-426. Those conceptual designs included the Atmosphere Processing Station, the colony complex (both interior and exterior), and the colonists’ vehicles. His sketches all looked fully-functional and very realistic. Syd Mead was given the assignment of envisioning most of military designs, including the troop carrier Sulaco. Cameron, an accomplished art designer in his own right, produced dozens of sketches as inspiration for the two artists, including one

which would eventually become the drop-ship. “Aliens,” like its predecessor, had one of the strongest art departments of any motion picture currently in production.

Peter Lamont, a highly-celebrated production designer, was hired to translate the imaginative graphics of Ron Cobb and Syd Mead into functional sets. Albert R. Broccoli recognized Lamont’s budding talent, and put him to work with legendary production designer Ken Adam on the James Bond films. In addition to bringing many of the designs to “life,” Lamont also worked closely with Crispian Sallis creating many of the Gateway sets from his own designs. He was later called upon to transform a deserted electrical generating plant into the interior for the Atmosphere Processing Station. The actual job of supervising the extensive floor effects, as well as overseeing the special effects, was awarded to John Richardson. Richardson had been involved early-on with the original “Alien”—when Walter Hill was still planning to direct—but was forced to withdraw from the project during its numerous delays.

For reasons of economy, Cameron and Hurd decided to shoot their ambitious sequel at Pinewood Studios, just outside London. Their budget of \$18.5 million would go much further in the United Kingdom, where the dollar much stronger than the pound. Carroll and Giler also negotiated with Twentieth Century-Fox for an 18-week shooting schedule with four months for post-production. Fox had originally planned to release the motion picture on July 1, 1986, during the highly lucrative Fourth of July holiday; but they soon realized that, even with a tight production schedule, the film would never be ready. They eventually conceded to a July 15<sup>th</sup> release date, which was later changed to July 22<sup>nd</sup> to avoid other scheduling conflicts. With time of the essence, Cameron took the script and drew storyboards for every key sequence in the film based on the designs from

Cobb and Mead. Jim knew that he could deliver the film on time if he simply followed his storyboards. He would also have to oversee the set construction and the special effects.

One of the most remarkable and ingenious miniature sets ever designed for a motion picture—that of the colony complex and its gigantic Atmosphere Processing Station—was built one sixth-scale over an entire soundstage. Since the script called for a well-used, slightly battered collection of buildings to represent the colony complex, the idea of modular sections, converted from space ship containers, was conceived. “We’re not talking technical prophecy here,” said Ron Cobb of his original designs. “It was understood from the very beginning that what we wanted was not a serious consideration of a believable future, but rather something more stylized. If we were being serious about all this, it isn’t likely that the colonists would even try to build on the planet surface. They’d probably go underground. But if we’d done that we’d have missed out on dusty streets and people huddled against the wind—the real frontier western look.”

Originally, Cameron and his designers toyed with the notion of building several modular sections which could be moved around, but it was decided that this would prove impractical for budgetary reasons. So, Jim and Gale Anne Hurd selected the L.A. Effects Group (under the direction of Larry Benson and Alan Markowitz), a fledgling optical house that had recently finished work on “Creature” (1985), to construct an elaborate miniature of the colony complex. Cameron avoided going to Boss Film or Industrial Light and Magic because he didn’t really know anyone there personally who would remain directly involved. The young filmmaker did know two members of the L.A. Effects Group, Robert and Dennis Skotak. He had worked with both of them on “Galaxy

of Terror” (1981) and “The Terminator” (1984), and entrusted them with the miniature work. Together with technical adviser Pat McClung, Robert and Dennis collected an assortment of precious junk, which had been leftover from the previous Bond movie, and assembled a massive complex.

### **Stan Winston and His Alien Designs**

During the very early stages of pre-production, James Cameron tried to involve H.R. Giger in his ambitious project; but the Swiss surrealist was far too busy creating otherworldly monsters for “Poltergeist II” (1986) to consider his offer. Cameron then acquired Giger’s original drawings for the egg, the face-hugger, the chest-burster, and the alien warriors from Brandywine, and began making sketches of his own. The life cycle of the Alien had already been clearly established in the first film: the creature begins as a pod containing a face-hugger, then springs out and attaches itself to a host; by way of a tube inserted in the victim’s throat, the face-hugger deposits an embryo which grows into a parasite; the parasite emerges by bursting from the victim’s chest, and grows quickly into an adult alien; the adult then cocoons its victims, depositing an alien larva, which consumes the host alive and grows into a pod. That last stage in the alien’s life cycle had been serendipitously removed by Ridley Scott during the final editing of “Alien,” and left room for Cameron to re-imagine the origins of the eggs.

“The version of cocooning that was shot for the first film involved the concept of the host’s body slowly forming into the egg itself from which the face-hugger would ultimately emerge. Had that existed in the first film, my story wouldn’t have worked,” Cameron revealed. “In my story, the eggs came from somewhere else. I focused on the idea of a hierachical hive structure where the central figure is a giant queen whose role it

is to further the species.” Carrying the alien life cycle to its logical conclusion, Jim made dozens of sketches that rendered his gigantic queen in loving detail. But with Hans Giger unavailable, the young filmmaker needed a first rate creature effects designer. He did not have to look far to find Stan Winston.

Winston, who had previously worked with Cameron and producer Gale Anne Hurd designing the robot version of “The Terminator,” seemed the ideal choice. One of the world’s premiere special make-up effects designers, Stan Winston actually came to Hollywood to become an actor. He had always loved motion pictures, particularly horror movies, and as a child, dreamed of fighting monsters alongside Peter Cushing and Vincent Price. Winston eventually used his talents as an artist, painter and sculptor to find odd jobs within the industry to keep him employed. While waiting for some studio to discover him as an actor, he worked developing his skills in make-up on several highly-prestigious television projects. He soon received two Emmy Awards for his work on “Gargoyles” (1972) and “The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman” (1974). Stan made the transition to film with little difficulty, and was nominated for the first Academy Award given in the field for make-up for “Heartbeeps” (1981).

Once in production, a major part of Winston’s job on “Aliens” was the construction of the new alien character, the Queen. Working from sketches provided by Cameron, he first constructed a miniature prototype with the help of his team of sculptors, including John Rosengrant, Alec Gillis, Willie Whitten, Greg Figiel, Brian Penikas, Shawn McEnroe, and Shane Mahan. The four-limbed, fifteen-foot creature was built around two men on stilts, using fiberglass and aluminum plating, and its heavy bulk was supported by a crane. The head and neck movements were controlled by hydraulics



and cables, while the legs and tail were puppeted externally. Stan spent a major amount of his time and budget working out the rough details of how the creature would move realistically without revealing the stuntman in the rubber suit. Later, as he became more involved in the project, he realized that a smaller version would also be necessary for certain shots. (Doug Beswick was hired to produce a quarter-scale one that was cable-controlled.) Winston also made several full-scale mock-ups of certain body features, such as the head and tail, for those inevitable close-up shots.

The biggest difference affected the design of the alien warrior but only in a very subtle way. “On the original alien,” Cameron continued, “there was a translucent cowl covering the whole top of the head that looked kind of like a porpoise back. We planned to do the same thing with ours, and to that end Stan had Tom Woodruff sculpt a ribbed, bone-like understructure that would fit underneath and be slightly visible through the cowl. When it was finished, they gave it a real nice paint job and I took a look at it and said, ‘Hey this looks much more interesting the way it is.’ So we just pitched the cowl and decided it was just another generation of aliens.”

Other alterations in the way the creature moved also made the alien warrior more insect-like and less like a man in a rubber suit. To this end, Winston not only created fifteen suits out of a spandex material but also almost a dozen puppets. The suits were made to fit stuntmen, actors and dancers, depending on what movements were required for the scene. The puppets were designed—in some case even larger than the suits—to make it easier to accomplish fantastic movements a man in a rubber suit could not possibly achieve. Only the most discerning eye would notice any change between the

two; but when that element of animation or puppetry was added, the special effect offered audiences something they had not seen before.

### **Production Details**

Principal photography on “Aliens” was scheduled to begin in September of 1985 at Pinewood Studios with the shooting of the opening sequence aboard the *Narcissus*, in which the deep salvage team first discover Ripley. But when word reached the production office that “Half Moon Street—currently shooting across town at EMI Elstree Studios with Sigourney Weaver—was running seriously behind schedule, panic began to spread. Weaver could not make the film’s fall start date, and would now be unavailable for the first three weeks of principal photography. Cameron’s carefully worked-out shooting schedule was suddenly obsolete. Gale Anne Hurd reminded Jim that, in order to be ready for a Summer ‘86 release, they needed to begin shooting no later than October of 1985. Since so much of the project revolved around Weaver’s participation, the young writer/director was left in a real quandary.

“Rehearsal time was something that we didn’t have on this film,” Cameron later admitted. “Sigourney not being available was a severe handicap; but as I rehearsed the troopers, the military characters, who were part of a close-knit squad with a close camaraderie, as a separate unit from the rest of the cast, I think her absence helped actually contribute to the tension and distance between her and the others.” Jim drilled his Colonial Marines with military precision, forcing them to do calisthenics, close order drill around the backlot, weapons prep, and target practice. Most of the cast stayed in character off the set, and when they were interacting, they would treat each other as their characters treated each other. But the writer/director could only work them so much. He

still had a motion picture to film, and according to his producer, he was already behind schedule.

One of the few sequences that did not directly involve Weaver was the assault team's foray into the Atmosphere Processing Station which had been taken over by aliens. Rather than build an elaborate set on the Pinewood lot or a complex miniature (that required special processing shots), Peter Lamont and his location crew had converted a decommissioned electrical generating station in the London suburb of Acton (about fourteen miles away) into the eerie biomechanical nest of the creatures. During the first couple of weeks, Cameron concentrated on the sequences leading to the discovery of the alien hideout, the one and only chest-burster scene, and the first of two major battles with the army of alien warriors. Since Lamont and his crew had been forced to remove dangerous asbestos from the station, much of the retrofitting (over the existing machinery) was still not complete, and things got off to a slow start. (Principal photography at Acton had been scheduled much later in the shoot.)

A major sequence photographed during this period was the troopers' descent into station. Inside the alien structure, they find the first physical evidence that confirms Ripley's story. They also discover a colonist who is still alive but trapped in a cocoon. Only moments later, she begins screaming as a chest-burster erupts from her body. Stan Winston and his crew were responsible for creating this illusion. They started by attaching a fiberglass chest piece to Barbara Coles' shoulders, and surrounding her head and neck with a resinous substance, which gave the appearance she was trapped in the wall. The artificial chest was then filled with several tubes to squirt fake blood, and a single hand puppet, operated by Tom Woodruff, was positioned inside. Much like the

setup in the first film, the chest-buster hand-puppet was designed to burst through the foam rubber appliance and t-shirt. But Winston soon learned, what the technicians on “Alien” had already discovered, that it was not easy to tear through cotton shirts. He was forced to distress several t-shirts with battery acid, as in the first film; but the early frustration caused more than a few tense moments for cast and crew. Subsequent scenes were filmed at some of the station’s completed sections, including one that involved a complicated hanging miniature built by Steve Begg and Chrissy Overs. Many of the sequences were also duplicated with a hand-held video camera, so that Jim could later interpolate these shots with those captured on film to lend an air of credibility.

After about two weeks of intensive shooting, Cameron decided to replace actor James Remar—originally cast in the key role of Hicks—with Michael Biehn. This change meant that several scenes which featured Hicks had to be restaged with Biehn. He was falling even further behind his shooting schedule.

By the time the cast and crew returned from Acton, Sigourney Weaver had joined them on the sets at Pinewood Studios. Her first scenes on the schedule included several key sequences that followed sequentially the troopers’ demoralizing rout at the power station. Ironically, most of the cast and crew felt demoralized by the less than perfect shoot. The realistic performances in the next few scenes attest to their own feelings of distress. But that was soon to change. Weaver’s enthusiasm for the project was apparent to everyone right from the beginning, and was very contagious. When filming wrapped for the fourth week, the production crew and cast were in very high spirits, having rebounded nicely from the earlier disappointments on the shoot.

Principal photography, involving the first and second units, continued for the next several weeks without any major problems or difficulty. Peter Lamont and his crew were scrambling to keep ahead of the first unit, as Cameron moved quickly from scenes in the Sulaco's cargo hold to Gateway Station to the colony complex itself. About mid-way through the shoot, problems developed between the production company and the L.A. Effects Group. Many of the miniatures, which Jim had hoped to combine with live action sequences for in-camera effects, were not yet ready, and other special effects sequences were running far behind schedule. "Originally," Brian Johnson explained, "L.A. Effects said that they could handle the work, so Jim and Gale hired them. But as time went on, it became obvious that they weren't equipped to handle all of it, so they came to me and asked if Akadon Motion Control could help them out." Later, when Cameron realized they would never be done in time, he himself hired Johnson to complete other aspects of their assignment. That decision not only caused some hurt feelings and discontent between the production company and the L.A. Effects Group but also led to a legal dispute regarding credit.

Towards the end of the year, with many scenes still remaining to be shot and the eighteen-week schedule drawing to a close, the first and second units began working overtime. Sequences featuring Ripley's rescue of Newt in the alien nest, the drop-ship's last minute arrival, and the struggle with the alien queen aboard the Sulaco were set up very quickly and filmed. Cameron felt comfortable with the fast pace, but his cast and crew were again showing signs of fatigue. Several variations of the scene with the monster descending from the drop-ship and tearing Bishop to pieces were shot under the supervision of Stan Winston and his crew. But none of them seemed to capture the true

essence of the scene. Eventually, after several more tries, Jim successfully filmed the sequence which would become legendary.

In late January of 1986, with the final shots of Ripley in the hypersleep chamber of the *Narcissus* having just been completed, principal photography on “*Aliens*” wrapped. A few days later, Peter Lamont and his crew began disassembling the remaining sets, so that the soundstages could be readied for the next production.

### **Post Production**

During post-production, James Cameron shut down the production for a week so that he could work with editor Ray Lovejoy on a rough cut of the film. Cameron knew that he had to cut thousands of feet of raw footage down into a workable, two-hour time frame, or Twentieth Century-Fox would hire its own editor to do the job. He and Lovejoy reluctantly trimmed much of the footage involving the colonists’ discovery of the derelict craft, and eliminated several references to Ripley’s daughter. Executives at Fox still weren’t satisfied, and cut two additional minutes of footage considered crucial to Ripley’s relationship with the space orphan Newt. Jim was later upset with himself that he that happen. (Many of these compelling sequences were later restored to the televised and digital versions of the film.)

With less than a few weeks remaining, the film was ready for its cinematic debut. With the tag-line “This time—it’s war,” the studio promoted the picture as a straight action-adventure, highlighting guns and the battle with the aliens and deemphasizing the character development of Ripley.

## **The Theatrical Release**

When it was released on Friday, July 22, 1986, “Aliens” faced incredibly stiff competition from John Carpenter’s “Big Trouble in Little China,” Ridley Scott’s “Legend,” and David Cronenberg’s remake of “The Fly.” But its real nemesis at the box office was the hugely popular “Top Gun,” directed by Ridley’s younger brother, Tony Scott. “Aliens” debuted in over a thousand theatres, and sent its competition running for cover. In its first week of release the movie easily knocked “Top Gun” off the top of the charts and later, while grossing an incredible \$40 million in its initial three weeks, committed serious damage to its other foes. Both theatre audiences and critics alike praised the film’s nonstop action and impressive special effects, but some reviewers did find fault with its violence. Regardless of the criticism, “Aliens” continued to perform well at the box office all throughout the summer and fall, and netted more than \$170 million in receipts (worldwide), emerging as the third highest grossing film of the year.

## **Critical Commentary**

“Aliens” is not only a worthy successor to the honored original but also surpasses Ridley Scott’s thriller, in many respects, by delivering all the chills and excitement of a roller coaster ride out-of-control. Meticulously crafted and beautifully filmed, James Cameron’s spectacle offers more otherworldly terror and suspense, more rousing action and more in-depth feeling than any three films of its kind. The film’s enduring popularity and success can be attributed to many of the same elements that made “Alien” popular and successful, including the archetypal nature of the story, the extraordinary visual style and the many contributions of the artists and technicians who labored for nearly a year on the project. But its true essence lies in the screen magic of writer/director James

Cameron. Even after repeating viewings of the work, audiences still continue to be hypnotized by the overall visual experience of the film.

The film owes so much of its strength and magic to writer/director James Cameron. Prior to “Aliens,” Cameron was a struggling filmmaker who had an eye for art direction and special effects. Like veterans Stanley Kubrick and Ridley Scott, he sought to prove that motion pictures could provide a narrative approach through its visual medium. His film generates a high premium excitement from the opening frame, dispensing with the need for traditional story-telling in favor of explosive action and nervejangling adventure. Cameron’s involvement in the project, from writing and directing to supervising the special effects, is apparent in nearly every facet of the production, and his genius is apparent throughout the film. Part tech noir, part heavy metal, and all action, the director brilliantly leads audiences on a reconnoiter into the heart of darkness and back again. But Cameron is equally effective in the smaller, more personal scenes. He evokes a truly compelling, Oscar-nominated performance from Sigourney Weaver as the troubled survivor of the Nostromo who must go back and face her worst nightmares. Her scenes with Newt provide the emotional core of the film, for we realize that Ripley is not only fighting for herself but also for motherhood and humanity itself. Cameron forces his central character to take responsibility for her own fate as well as the fate of the universe, and that represents high drama for the director. Juggling all of these elements at once, Cameron combines plot, characterization, hard-hitting action, and special effects to create a truly unique film experience.

Of course, at the emotional center of the film, is Sigourney Weaver in what may be her best performance as Warrant Officer Ripley. Even though she began the first



movie as one of the anonymous members of the crew, her character is firmly established here by Cameron with several key scenes. Awakened from her unusually long hypersleep, she begins experiencing the first signs of post traumatic stress disorder. She hallucinates the presence of an alien parasite in her body. Then, burdened with the knowledge that her daughter has died of old age despising her, Ripley continues her descent into a personal hell, and begins to fall to pieces. She finally decides to fight the continuous nightmares by returning to the LV-426, and by facing the creature, once and for all. Ripley is then trust into the role of protector, and surrogate mother, when the soldiers discover Newt, the colony's sole survivor. Each of these sequences allows Weaver to express a different facet of Ripley: first, as a survivor, then, a victim (of her nightmares), next, a warrior, and finally, a mother (the role she once abandoned). Her multi-leveled performance was clearly worthy of the Academy Award for Best Actress of 1986.

Supporting Weaver throughout the film, Cameron has assembled a wonderful collection of actors and actress to turn his potentially anonymous cast of soldiers into a group of very realistic characters. The members of his squad are not stereotyped as macho, Rambo-like warriors, but rather are portrayed as enlisted men and women who gripe, joke and risk their lives for each other. By focusing on their basic humanity and their determination for survival, Jim Cameron transforms his "grunts" into individuals the audience can relate. Played mostly by fresh screen faces, each of the actors is given a moment in the spotlight. First among Cameron's collection of characters is Michael Biehn as Corporal Hicks. Boyishly handsome but with cat-like reflexes and cold, dead eyes, he provides a powerhouse of pure adrenaline with his performance. In fact, when

Hicks first pulls out his “Terminator” shotgun, the audience always reacts with raucous approval. Jenette Goldstein, with her Hispanic accent and Ms. Olympia physique, is equally compelling in the role of Vasquez. She is not only the toughest of the marines but also a counterpoint to Weaver’s very assertive Ripley. Bill Paxton is very good as Hudson, the private who first laughs in the face of danger then falls apart. His comic pacing provides the film with some of its funnier movements. Lance Henriksen and Paul Reiser also contribute memorable performances to the film.

Like its predecessor, “Aliens” is also a triumph of production design, set decoration and special effects. Credit for the distinctive look of the film is shared equally by Ron Cobb, Syd Mead and Cameron. Stan Winston and his team of specialists also deserve praise for not only bringing the alien creatures to life but also making them appear much more than men-in-rubber-suits. Brian Johnson, Robert and Dennis Skotak also provide some stunning visual effects, worthy of the Academy Award. Horner’s rousing score, which was clearly better orchestrated than Goldsmith’s score from the first movie, contributes to the overall atmosphere, and underscores the non-stop action.

Over the years, since its initial release in the summer of 1986, “Aliens” has become accepted as a genuine screen classic. In fact, the two films are often mentioned in many ten-best lists of science fiction. While its roots may be traced back to Robert Heinlein’s *Starship Troopers*, Joe Haldeman’s *Forever War* or other pulp fantasy adventures of the thirties and forties, the film does manage to transcend those simple stories in order to reach exceptional heights of its own.

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