

Telling The Great Stories Of The Greatest Generation

An Interview with Steven C. Barber, Chief Executive Officer, Vanilla Fire Productions

EDITORS' NOTE Steven Barber is a writer and filmmaker living in Santa Monica, California. He was born in Syracuse, New York in 1961, and is the great nephew of Edith Wharton, the first female writer to win the Pulitzer Prize. After a three-year stint at Augusta Military Academy in Ft. Defiance, Virginia in the late 1970s and then graduating from Western Kentucky University, Barber headed west to give his writing and acting chops a workout. Having worked on many films and a series of television shows in the early 1980s, he took a break from Hollywood and found work and adventure on 19 cruise ships in the 1980s and early 1990s that would take him to many countries and over 10,000,000 nautical miles. His first novel, *Below the Waterline*, a fictional and whimsical tale of love on the high seas, is a big seller on Amazon.com. Upon returning to Hollywood in the mid-1990s, Barber found some success on a series of reality shows and, after a falling out with a large corporation he had been working with, decided to bankroll everything he had with \$50,000 worth of camera equipment and give documentary filmmaking a shot. This fortuitous and serendipitous action paid off in a big way. Barber's first film, *Return to Tarawa*, is an award-winning documentary that has been able to get congressional legislation passed in Congress to bring home MIAs from World War II. Barber's second film, *Unbeaten*, is a magical story about 31 paraplegics who take on the world's most grueling road race and push their wheelchairs 267 miles in six days between Fairbanks and Anchorage.



Steven C. Barber

Barber's mission is to raise the profile of the disabled athlete and the disabled American. The success of Unbeaten and Return to Tarawa has allowed Vanilla Fire Productions (vanillafire.org) to grow into a full-service documentary and commercial video production house.

Will you discuss your career journey?

My career started when I moved to Los Angeles to become an actor, and after about three months of that, I realized that I could not be beholden to others to get their approval and to see if I had talent.

I spent the next 12 years on 19 cruise ships during which time I traveled the world and saw 83 countries and then ended up in Los Angeles.

I took a serendipitous mountain bike ride one day in 1997 and ran into the actor, Eddie Albert, famous for his role in the *Green Acres* television show. However, he was much, much more than that, as he was one of the main heroes of the battle of Tarawa in 1943 where 1,200 Marines were killed, and thousands of Japanese were killed. This was the first American full-frontal amphibious attack of a Japanese stronghold. This incredible meeting put me on a journey to be a documentary filmmaker now with nine feature documentaries and three films that have gone to the Oscar shortlist to my credit.

Will you provide an overview of Vanilla Fire Productions and how you define its mission?

The mission of Vanilla Fire Productions is to be the most noble film company in America that shines the light on American exceptionalism at

the highest level. We've been fortunate to work with Ed Harris, Kelsey Grammer, Josh Brolin, Dan Aykroyd, John Savage, Joe Mantegna, and Jacqueline Bisset, just to name a few.

What is the focus of your movies, and will you highlight your past projects?

The focus of Vanilla Fire Productions has been telling the great stories of the greatest generation – World War II veterans. Since most have now passed, we are focusing in on stories that really make a difference. Our newest project is called *Into The Light* about a holocaust survivor who survived seven Nazi death camps with the help of a pencil as the camp artist. We had the late great Norman Lear as one of our producers and have more than two hours of footage of him, as well as film of the holocaust survivor and the artist, Kalman Aron, meeting for the first time, which is unbelievable. In my heart, I believe this film will not only get nominated for an Oscar, but there's a very, very good chance we will win.

Future projects include documentaries on the building of the Mario Andretti and the Joe Namath

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Steven Barber and the Apollo 11 Monument (above and opposite page)

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monuments. We also have a Vietnam documentary, called *Saving Sergeant Stewart*, about a lost airman in Vietnam. We recently finished our Apollo 11 movie called, *We Must Be Bold*, about the building of the Apollo 11 monument and the history of the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo programs.

What led to your interest in pursuing monuments, and will you discuss this work?

The Apollo 11 monument came to me, once again, quite divinely, as I had a documentary all cued up with Buzz Aldrin, the second man on the moon, which fell apart for a number of reasons. Because of that, I took yet another bike ride, and on that bike ride I envisioned the Apollo 11 monument at the NASA Space Flight Center at Cape Kennedy, and I made it come to fruition. No one had ever built a monument commemorating Apollo 11, the greatest story in the history of the world, which was a bit shocking. However, I was able to get it done.

Sometimes in life, success sneaks in through the back door disguised as failure, and this was one of those moments. Being able to

build the monument to the greatest story in the history of mankind was certainly my proudest moment, and included working with America’s greatest sculptors, the Lundeen brothers out of Loveland, Colorado.

After the Apollo 11 monument, I was able to envision an Apollo 13 monument at Space Center Houston which I was able to accomplish working with Captain Jim Lovell, Commander of Apollo 13. I was then able to envision a Sally Ride monument honoring the first American woman in space at the Cradle of Aviation Museum in New York, and then I was able to build another Sally Ride Monument at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. It was unveiled on July 4 in front of her 99-year-old mother and her family along with 5,000 patriots and worldwide media. It was a wonderful day to be an American.

Altogether, I have raised over \$5 million from some great patriots, from Dan Gilbert, the CEO of Rocket Mortgage, to David Grainger, the CEO of the Grainger Corporation. Some amazing women came on board as well including Sherry Lansing, former Paramount chief, and then activist Gloria

Steinem, as well as Maria Shriver, the former First Lady of California, and Gretchen Carlson, former Fox News anchor.

I’m now working on building the first African-American, NASA astronaut monument in history, and the first Hispanic female NASA astronaut monument in history, as well as monuments for the great Joe Namath and Mario Andretti.

What do you feel are the keys to effective leadership?

To me, the most effective leadership is not based on just having a vision, but instead on executing. Without execution, there is no leadership. There is absolutely nothing. You can have all the great ideas in the world, and if you don’t write them down, and you don’t execute them, it’s all for not. Execution – that is the key.

How did your experience in the military shape your management style?

The military affected my management style by teaching me to be very succinct and to delegate tasks to others who are much better at that task than I am. If you don’t care who gets the credit, a great deal can be accomplished.

I’ve been incredibly fortunate to have been able to go into battle situations on Blackhawks and Shonooks in Afghanistan, and I was also able to live on the Carl Vinson, a nuclear aircraft carrier, for one week, and I had one carrier landing, which is beyond a bucket list opportunity. Being in those situations and observing the men and women of the military completely changed the way I delegate authority.

If it were not for the men and the women of the United States military, the world would be thrust into darkness.

What advice do you offer to young people interested in pursuing a career in filmmaking?

My advice to young people getting into film is very, very simple. Go buy a camera. Start shooting. Shoot every day. Shoot what you love. Shoot what you don’t love, but just keep shooting.

I never went to film school. I never read a book on making films. I bought a camera and I just started shooting and working with people that were better than I was, and that has served me well.

This is the greatest time in the history of film and to be a filmmaker as there are literally 700 shows being streamed around the world as we speak, and that number is growing exponentially. There is so much work for new filmmakers that didn’t exist when I started. It is absolutely remarkable. ●

