

## **JAMES ARNESS BIO**

James Arness (born as James Aurness on May 26, 1923, Minneapolis, Minnesota) is an actor best known for portraying Marshal Matt Dillon on Gunsmoke for 20 years. Arness has the distinction of having played the role of Marshal Matt Dillon in five separate decades: 1955 to 1975 in the weekly series, then in the decade of the 1980s (1987) Return to Dodge, and four more made-for-TV Gunsmoke movies in the 1990s.

Arness's parents were Rolf Cirkler Aurness and Ruth Duesler, descendants of German and Norwegian immigrants. Arness is the older brother of actor Peter Graves. He was the tallest actor ever to play a lead role, standing 6'7".

Arness served in the United States Army during World War II with the U.S. 3rd Infantry Division, and was severely wounded during Operation Shingle, leading to a lifelong slight limp.

A rifleman in 2nd Platoon, Company E, 2nd Battalion, 7th Infantry, on January 25, 1944, he received his "baptism of fire" when he was almost killed by enemy 20 mm flak wagon fire during a night patrol behind enemy lines. A few days later, Arness was involved in a sustained firefight with enemy machine gunners occupying a farmhouse. Ultimately, the enemy brought mortar fire down on Arness and his squad, which were lying low in a shallow drainage ditch filled with water. One mortar round hit within a few feet of Arness, killing the infantryman to his left. Heavy artillery then pinned down 2nd Platoon until nightfall. Using darkness to mask their escape the platoon quietly and quickly made their way back to their lines.

Later his squad engaged an enemy machine gun in a farmhouse. Upon entering the house Arness and two other rifleman crept up the steps, and threw grenades into the room with the machine gun. Once the grenades exploded, Arness and the others rushed the room and sprayed the enemy with rifle fire, killing the three-man gun crew.

On the night of February 1, 1944, 2nd Platoon (with Arness) was assigned to reconnoiter a sector between the lines. There was no moon. The platoon spread out to minimize casualties and advanced slowly, under direct orders not to speak or make a sound. Due to his night combat experience and a ""sixth sense"" Arness was the point man for his squad. Moving silently as possible, approximately 40 to 50 feet ahead of his squad, Arness would later say that it was so dark that he could not see his feet or where he was stepping.

After walking approximately 20 minutes there was no contact and except for the night sounds the air was quiet. Arness moved through a small vineyard. Suddenly he heard voices just 50 feet ahead. Seconds later Arness heard a ""guttural scream"" and an enemy machine gun fired, hitting Arness in the right leg with a machine gun bullet (or bullets).

Despite the excruciating pain (he later said the bones in his lower right leg

""had been shot all to hell"" he was able to leap over a row of vines, and out of the line of fire. Now intense enemy fire was directed at him from both sides. Then an enemy ""potato masher"" concussion grenade went off near him, the explosion literally lifting Arness off the ground. Arness hugged the earth as enemy machine gunfire racked around him, just 18-inches above the ground.

After an intense firefight, the enemy was eventually beaten back or eliminated by the rest of 2nd Platoon. While lying in the vineyard Arness felt he was going into shock. In a semi-conscious state he heard voices, realizing it was soldiers from his own platoon checking on the wounded and dead. The point man next to Arness had been killed, as well as several others. Finally a medic found Arness and asked if he had been hit.

Arness responded, ""In the leg"" and realized he could not move. The medic said the leg bones had been severely splintered. Treating the wound with sulfa powder, the medic administered a shot of morphine directly into Arness' stomach. The medic then declared the wound a ""ZI"" or ""Zone of Interior"" wound, (aka Million Dollar Wound), which meant an eventual ticket stateside.

On January 29, 1945, having received numerous surgeries, Arness received an honorable discharge. Still, his wounds would affect him for the rest of his life. In later years Arness has suffered from acute leg pain (which prevented him from mounting a horse) and has undergone a series of operations to remove bullet fragments that had infused into the bone.

After the war James Arness entered Beloit College where he was initiated into Beta Theta Pi (with his original surname).

According to his 2001 autobiography, James Arness - An Autobiography, he landed on Anzio Beach on January 21, 1944 while serving as a rifleman with 2nd Platoon, E Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Regiment of the 3rd Infantry Division. Due to his height (6' 7"), acting as ""a depth finder"", he was first ordered off his landing craft to determine the depth of the water (it came up to his waist).

Though primarily identified with Westerns, he also is remembered for appearing in two science fiction films, The Thing from Another World and Them!. He was a close personal friend of John Wayne and co-starred with him in Big Jim McLain, Hondo, Island in the Sky and The Sea Chase. Wayne said that when he imagined Marshal Dillon, he saw Arness. Wayne even did a television spot introducing Arness in the role.

After Gunsmoke ended, Arness performed primarily in western-themed movies and television series, including How the West Was Won, and five made-for-television Gunsmoke reunion movies between 1987 and 1994. A notable exception was a brief turn as a big city police officer in the short-lived 1981 series, McClain's Law. Arness did the narration for Harry Carey Jr.'s western, Comanche Stallion (which was directed by Clyde Lucas).

For his contribution to the television industry, James Arness has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame at 1751 Vine Street. In 1981, he was inducted into the Western Performers Hall of Fame at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage

Museum in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. In 2006, Arness was inducted into the Santa Clarita Walk of Western Stars and gave a related television interview.

Materials excerpted from Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia.