Pim Korver: ‘Seaneast’

Pim Korver is a Dutch cameraman who has specialised in maritime productions throughout his long career. Now aged 74, he still regularly operates his cameras, producing documentaries and corporates, mainly on nautical topics. GTC international representative Richard van Nijnatten tells the story of a fascinating career, while Pim imparts many useful tips on filming at sea.

ALL PICTURES: PIM KORVER FILM+VIDEO

▲ *Pim Korver ready to film in Dubai*

It all started in the early 60s when Pim, at that time working for the Dutch Public TV News broadcaster NTS, was granted permission to sail with the Hoek van Holland lifeboat when it set out to rescue the crew of the *Gladonia*, a small coaster about to sink in Dutch coastal waters. As the lifeboatmen battled to get the crew off the stricken vessel, Pim decided he needed shots from the sailors' POV and, before anyone could say no, he had jumped on board the *Gladonia*. The result was great footage but also meant the lifeboat crew had yet another person to save!

Although officially reprimanded for this impulsive act, Pim had gained the respect of the lifeboat crew for his bravery. The story spread quickly and ever since then he has been able to count on the assistance and support of the crews of all KNRM lifeboat stations in The Netherlands.

During his long career, Pim has made hundreds of maritime films. For years he produced all films for marine suppliers Smit Lloyd, marine contractors and salvage company Smit Tak/Smit International and the Dutch lifeboat organisation KNRM. He has also filmed for the shipyard IHC, and for Van Der Giessen-De Noord, the Dutch Royal Marine Corps, Japanese dredger company Penta-Ocean and many, many others. Recently, he covered the salvage of the MSC Napoli that sank in Lyme Bay and is currently working on his second documentary on this for Fairmount Marine. There is probably no ocean or sea in the world on which Pim hasn't sailed.

Pim's most well-known documentaries out of many award-winning productions are *Three in One*, about the salvage of the oil tanker *Betelgeuse* that exploded at the jetty of Whiddy Island in Bantry Bay, Ireland in 1980, and *March 6th*, about the salvage operation of the *Herald Of Free Enterprise*, which capsized in 1987 just out of the port of Zeebrugge, killing 193 people.

Water, water everywhere

In the first half of Pim's career everything was shot on film; mostly 16mm but some 35mm. The equipment was bulky and heavy, requiring good physical fitness in order to operate in the difficult and regularly dangerous conditions.

"You can imagine that the biggest enemy is water, especially salt water. Today, specialist companies make excellent camera protection with newly developed lightweight fabrics, but at that time the only thing available was plastic. Over the years I have tested just about every camera protection available on the market. For the last 10 years or so I mainly use Kata products – camera gloves, raincoats, etc – and Pelican cases, as I find the products of these two brands best for the circumstances I work in."

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It's not always possible to use standard gear and Pim has regularly had to develop dedicated tools and brackets. For salvage work the weather needs to be calm, but shooting aboard lifeboats or tugs at open sea can get rough. One recurring problem is water on the lens. Back in the 70s, working with the recently retired CEO of dredger shipyard IHC (a mechanical engineer by trade), Pim developed a motorised centrifugal screen that could be mounted on a small handheld 16mm camera. It took some experimenting but the system they built did the trick.

However, as the camera and centrifugal screen were not protected by a raincoat-type cover, the screen regularly broke down due to salt water getting in and affecting the drive wheels, belt and mechanism, causing the motor to burn out. Today, Pim uses a Spintec rain and snow deflector. *"This system is not only better protected against the elements, it's also lighter and more rugged thanks to better materials. Also, my system made a hell of a noise, making it impossible to record sound near the camera. With the Spintec I have even done close-to-camera interviews in pouring rain, making the post-production people wonder for days how it was possible there were no raindrops on the lens."*

The Spintec system has one disadvantage over Pim's. The system Pim built had its motor beside the lens so the part in front of the lens was spinning fast everywhere. The Spintec rotates around the centre of the optical axis with the rotating speed in the exact middle of the image, as a result, close to zero. Although usually unnoticed due to the drama of the shots, this does generate a bit of softness in the centre; in most cases this is an acceptable compromise in the light of all the advantages.

Going under

Before any new KNRM lifeboat is launched, it is thoroughly tested. These vessels are built to be self-righting and one of the most spectacular evaluations in the series is the capsize test, in which the lifeboat is pulled upside down by a crane and should then immediately right itself. After several successful trials with no people on board, this test is repeated with lifeboat crew members strapped into the wheelhouse.

When asked to film these tests, since shots from the shore were unable to capture properly the effects and impact on the crew, Pim decided he needed to mount cameras on deck and in the wheelhouse. Having a good relationship with the shipyard, he managed to talk them into welding camera fixtures at specific positions that would allow him quickly to mount small cameras in underwater housings, not just for the capsizing trials but for years to come, once the boats were in operational use.

However, the small fixed cameras inside the wheelhouse still didn't really provide the pictures Pim was looking for during the tests. As the cameras rotated with the boat, the visual effect of going upside down was voided. So, together with the shipbuilder, Pim developed a camera mount that made it possible to rotate the camera over the longitudinal axis of the boat or, to be more precise, to make the image of the boat rotate around the camera axis, as the weight of the camera is below the centre making the camera stay level at all times. This mount was attached with a sucker to one of the rear windows and had a damping mechanism to prevent the camera swinging out of control when the boat uprighted itself abruptly. As the camera stays level no matter the angle of the boat, it clearly shows the crew members sideways and then upside down. The tremendous noise of loose screws and other pieces of construction materials still somewhere in the boat completes the effect!

Steady as she goes

Pim has filmed with many different cameras over the years – film and video, big and small. For stability and feel he prefers the heavier weight of a shoulder-mounted camera, but there is a disadvantage in requiring two hands on the camera, leaving no free hand for steadying oneself on a rolling ship, and meaning someone has to be around all the time to assist or grab you.

Pim hardly ever uses a tripod on deck because to do so means that *"the camera moves with the ship and, as a result, the horizon will be all over the place. Secondly, the ship itself and the action on the ship become very smooth and static in the shot so you lose the tension and dynamics."* He adds, *"Your body is the best stabiliser; I normally try to sit on my knees and put one arm through a railing or around a flag pole. If I can be assisted by a crew member, I ask them to hold me at the back at waist level, not the shoulder as this can influence my stability and ability to turn or move the camera quickly. You can also consider securing yourself to the vessel but, having seen what I have over the years, I find that way too dangerous, even with a quick release mechanism."*

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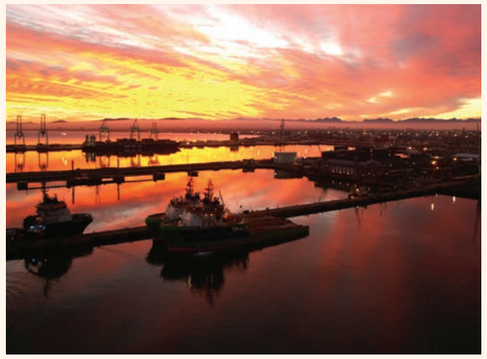
Sea-legs

When Pim first started to work for the Dutch lifeboat organisation KNRM their boats didn't sail very fast, and it was possible to shoot handheld. *"Shooting handheld on board a moving vessel isn't easy,"* says Pim, *"it takes a lot of practice and physical strength to counter the movement of the ship with your body to keep the camera steady. You need to have 'sea-legs' to be able to feel and predict what movement – both intensity and direction – will come next and to start compensating before it takes place. Of course, I'm talking about the likes of lifeboats and tugs in bad weather here; you won't run into these issues filming aboard a stabilised 300-meter cruise ship in calm weather."*

Pim has tried out gyro-stabilised systems, but generally found they did not add enough value to compensate for the extra weight and increased dimensions of the camera configuration. *"The trick of filming ship-to-ship (or any other vessel or platform) is to keep the horizon level. And if there's no horizon in the shot, use the vertical lines of the subject as a reference, because your own 'spirit level' can be way off due to the G-forces on your body. Only when the camera angle stays level will you fully experience the movement of the object you're filming. By placing something of the ship you're on or a nearby buoy in the foreground, the shot will be more exciting as the movement of both platforms will be out of sync and also different from the movement of the waves.*

▲ *Top Left and Bottom Right: Shooting from a low angle to enhance the sense of the height and roughness of the waves; Top Right: Low camera angles and heavy surf are always good for some spectacular shots; Bottom Left: Capsize test of Dutch lifeboat*

www.gtc.org.uk Shooting at sea



Sample Kit List for Shooting at Sea

Sony PDW-700 camera
KATA camera glove
KATA rain cover
Spintec rain & snow deflector

Sony PMW-EX3
KATA camera glove
KATA CRC-12 PL rain cover

Sony HXR-MC1P PoV camera/ recorder
Seatool underwater housing

Panasonic AG-DVX200 camera
Equinox Pro6 underwater housing

GoPro HD cameras
Lots of GoPro accessories, mounts, clamps, clips, straps...

Portable audio recorder (no on-camera audio recording when in underwater housing)

All kinds of clamps, mounts, etc...
Tools to mount/repair clamps
Various types of rope and (elastic) bands
Gaffer tape
Re-usable tie-raps (gaffer tape doesn't stick on wet surfaces)
Shammy
Anti-fog agent
Lenspen
Spare UV filters
Can of pressured air

Survival suit (when going out with a lifeboat)

▲ *Top: Tanker fire: no room for mistakes; Bottom Left: Fairmount tugs moored in Kaapstad; Bottom Right: On board the semi-submergible barge Gafea Lifter*

Also, to increase the dynamics of the environment and high waves, it is best to shoot low. The higher you go the calmer the waves appear. That's why shots from a helicopter will not generally capture the excitement of a rough sea as well as being at deck level. Then again, when it really gets rough, a low-flying helicopter will be a far better platform to shoot from than another ship. At a certain point the movement of the ship you're on will become so violent that it's impossible to stay on your feet. On the contrary, a helicopter becomes more stable as the wind speed increases – so long as it's not too gusty."

Jumping the waves

Today, the small KNRM lifeboats (15–20 metres) go very fast and jump over the waves. Since they do not 'go with the flow', sea-legs won't help and it becomes close to impossible and way too dangerous to shoot handheld. This is why in bad weather Pim usually chooses to fix the cameras to the ship and wheelhouse. The optical stabilisation that many cameras offer these days is very helpful in compensating for vibrations while retaining some movement in shot and avoiding a 'glued-to-the-wall' effect. When the camera is fixed to the wheelhouse, with part of the structure in shot, the optical stabilisation will mean the wall doesn't stay exactly static, enhancing the feeling of it being a spectator's POV.

In addition, some of the lifeboat crew members will have minicams mounted on their helmets, but Pim never relies on the footage from these cameras. *"I ask them not to move or shake their heads too much, but you can imagine that in the heat of the moment this is not a priority. Most of the footage is useless, but the four to five seconds of spectacular shots you get every now and then, providing a completely different angle, are well worth it in relation to the cost of these cameras (such as GoPros)."*

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Amazingly, only once in his whole career has a piece of gear disappeared overboard into the ocean. During one salvage operation, Pim was sitting in the gangway of a diving vessel swapping a 16mm cassette, when a diver passed by and accidentally kicked the new cassette. In a reflex to save it, Pim let go of the other cassette housing the exposed material, meaning that the situation went from bad to worse. Luckily, one of the salvage guys nearby saw it happen and immediately dropped a small buoy at the exact spot. A diver went down the 30 meters and, believe it or not, came back with the cassette only minutes after. They plunged the cassette into a bin full of freshwater and rinsed it for a long time to wash out the salt. Then they packed it in a plastic bag filled with freshwater and rushed it to the lab (which being at sea involved some logistic challenges, a fast boat, a helicopter and a fast car...). Very surprisingly, neither cassette nor the stock had suffered any damage and all the footage was saved.

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▲ *Top Left: Salvage of the Herald of Free Enterprise that capsized out of Port of Zeebrugge, Belgium, on March 6th, 1987; Top Right: The chemical tanker Anna Broere was loaded with dangerous chemicals when it sank. During the salvage everyone, including Pim, had to wear protective clothing and breathing protection. Looking through the viewfinder of a 16mm camera with a mask on comes with extra challenges; Middle Right: Left: Water deflector based on the centrifugal screen principle, made by Pim in the early 80s; Right: Spintec rain and snow deflector; Bottom Left: LDK-150 camera fitted with a Spintec rain and snow deflector, mounted on the bow of a lifeboat, ready for shooting some rough sea footage; Bottom Middle: A specially designed clamp that allows the camera to rotate around the optical axes, mounted on one of the rear windows of a lifeboat during a capsize test; Bottom Right: Being one of the crew is essential if you want to succeed as a maritime film-maker (Pim is far right)*

Team bonding

This work is not for the faint-hearted and over the years Pim has witnessed many dramas, not all with a positive outcome. Things can go wrong, leading to significant damage, casualties and even deaths. *"At sea you can't just walk away. When there's a fire you can't call the fire brigade, you pick up a fire hose yourself. And when you are injured yourself you hope that the few people there will be able to help and maybe even save your life. This is why it's essential to do the maximum to become a full member of the ship's crew as quickly as possible, and this requires significant 'soft skills'. Crew members look after each other and when you're one of them they will always watch your back, as long as you also watch theirs."* For this reason, Pim prefers to work alone: *"When you're with a team yourself it's very hard to integrate into another team, especially if one of your team doesn't have the soft skills required in order to gain respect from the ship's crew. And, by asking the ship's crew to assist me when I need help, I make them member of my 'crew' too."*

Pim explains: *"Communication is essential, especially in potentially dangerous situations. That's why I always inform the captain or coxswain and crew about my intentions – where I'll be going and positioning myself in order to shoot. Things can change rapidly, and when you're wrapped up in whatever you're filming, it's impossible always to be fully aware of what's going on around you. But when the mutual trust is there you can get the shots you need while relying on the crew to take care of you. I remember on one occasion, in my quest for the best shot, I had placed myself between a fireman and the fire, with my back to the fire in order to film the fireman head on. I hadn't realised that in doing so I had placed myself closer to the fire than was safe. Another fireman close by observed this, and because by then he had an understanding of my work too, rather than ordering me away he just made a water screen between me and the fire, allowing me to finish the shot."*

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It is this mixture of experience, specialist knowledge and affinity with the sea-going crews that combine to make Pim such an ace when it comes to filming in harsh maritime environments. It takes a lot more than basic camera skills to be successful as a maritime film-maker, or 'seaneast' (a play on 'sea' plus 'cineaste'), as Pim prefers to call himself. Of the multiple skills required, he views as most important the soft skill of being able to become accepted as a crew member, plus the ability to acquire a thorough understanding of what's going on in order to be in a position to anticipate what will happen. Being accepted has meant that he is usually allowed to attend daily briefings and there have been occasions when his vision and ideas have helped the salvage crew to develop, review or re-plan their course of action. Pim's hint to all those shooting in a similar situation: *"If you are working with a team and you see that someone doesn't fit in, leave that person ashore, as he or she could seriously jeopardise the mission."*

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And last but not least, remember: always one hand for the camera and one hand for the boat!

Fact File

More information
Pim Korver MGTC, Pim Korver Film + Video, The Netherlands:
http://www.pkfv.nl
Author: Richard van Nijnatten MGTC MBKS, Audio Visual Design, The Netherlands:
www.avdesign.nl