**Shooting at sea**

**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.

I all started in the early 60s when Pim, at that time working for the Dutch television 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 lifeboatman battled to get the crew off the stricken vessel, Pim decided he needed shots from the sailors’ POVs 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 storyspread quickly and even 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 the Dutch rescue organisation KNRM. He has also filmed for the shipyard IHC, and Tak/Smit International and the Dutch marine suppliers Smit Lloyd, marine engineers by trade, Pim developed a motion-controlled centrifugal screen that could be mounted on a small handheld 10mm 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. It affected the drive wheels, belt and mechanism, causing the motor to burn out. Today, Pim uses a Spinet 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 heck of a noise, making it impossible to record sound near the camera. With the Spinet I have even done close-to-camera interviews in pouring rain, making the past production people wonder for days how it was possible there were no soundtracks on the film."

The Spinet system has one disadvantage over Pim’s. The system Pim built had its motor beside the lens; so close to the propeller arms. The Spinet rotates around the center of the optical axis with the rotating speed in the exact middle of the image, as a result, close to room. Although usually unnoticed due to the drama of the shots, this does generate a bit of softness in the center; in most cases this is an acceptable compromise in the light of all the advantages. "The system is below the centre making the camera clay level at all times. This mount was attached with a snot to one of the rear windows and had a damping mechanism to prevent the camera swinging out of control when the boat upturned 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!"

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**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 go 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 action on the ship becomes very smooth and static in the shot so you lose the tension and dynamics. He adds, “Your body is the best stabilizer; I normally try to sit on my knees and put one arm through a raking 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 bed, having seen what I have over the years, I find that way too dangerous, even with a quick release mechanism.”

**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 100-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. 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.”

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**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
Jumping the waves

Today, the small RNLR (30 ft) 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 may be too dangerous to shoot handheld. This is why in bad weather Pim usually chooses to fix the camera to the ship and wheelchair. 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 wheelchair, with part of the structure in shot, the optical stabilisation will mean the wall doesn’t stay exactly static, enhancing the feeling of being a spectator’s POVs.

In addition, some of the lifeboat crew members will have misogynes 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 five to five seconds of spectacular shots you get every now and then...” 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, smoking 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 metres and, believe it or not, came back with the cassette only minutes later. They plunged the cassette into a bowl of freshwater and rinsed it for a long time to wash out the salt. Back with the cassette only minutes later, immediately dropped a small buoy at the exact spot. A diver went down the 30 metres and, believe it or not, came back with the cassette only minutes later.

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.

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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 upsidedown 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. 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.”

It is this mixture of experience, specialist knowledge and agility 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 ‘seacam’ (a play on ‘seas’ plus ‘cinematography’), as Pim prefers to call himself. Of the multiple skills required, he views as most important the soft skill of being able to accept being 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 such a 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.”

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