

Panavision in depth

Toby Oliver ACS: 'Beneath Hill 60'



Toby Oliver ACS is another of Australia's stellar DOPs with impressive credits to his name. His experience covers all genres of commercials, short films, music videos, documentaries and features.

Recently, he shot the World War I movie, 'Beneath Hill 60' (Dir: Jeremy Sims, script, David Roach) which opened on April 15 to critical acclaim from reviewers and audiences, who see it as an indication that Australia's film industry is undergoing a very healthy year of releases. 'Beneath Hill 60' is a story of bravery that has been eclipsed by Gallipoli, but is just as fascinating and praiseworthy.

The plot revolves around the army tunnelers, miners who created a maze of narrow, dark, underground tunnels, laying explosives which were later detonated in a massive blast to destroy enemy positions. The film was inspired by the record of the time left behind by charismatic soldier, Captain Oliver Woodward, winner of the Military Cross and Two Bars for his bravery and maverick daring.



Filming was entirely based in Townsville which has not been, until now, considered a movie location. What was so special about that city for this film?

Townsville was where the story of 'Beneath Hill 60' all began – Captain Oliver Woodward was from the area and our EP, Ross Thomas, had found his 'lost' diaries that became the basis of the true story, in a dumpster in nearby Charters Towers. Local Townsville identities and businesses were investors in the film providing cash, filming locations, earthmoving machinery and lots of support.

How do you rate the experience working there?

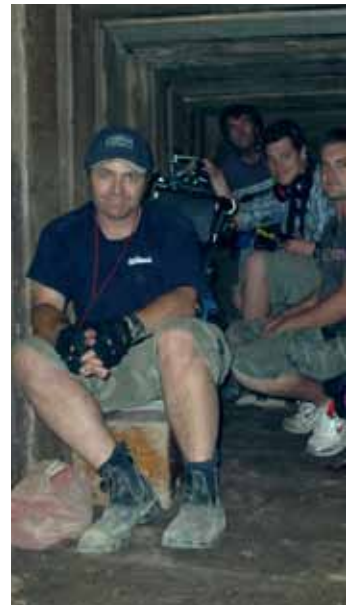
Townsville was great for filming – it has most of the big-city facilities and infrastructure you need for an ambitious project, plus beautiful ENQ weather, great landscapes, period buildings and a tropical island next door.

There's a fine balance of close-ups at the start and wider, more epic shots towards the climax of the story. How much does this contribute to the suspense of the final scenes?

Jeremy Sims (the director) always planned to go a bit wider towards the end, to give the story a bigger scope as the troops build up in the trenches before the big explosion. The VFX team at Cutting Edge were saviours in this regard, providing a number of fantastic CGI shot extensions that really gave us a sense of the scale of the battlefield and Messines Ridge.

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Critics have noted the contrast between the tunnel shots and the flashbacks to rural Australia as part of the strong dramatic technique of the narrative. How did you get the most out of that contrast?

I treated the war and tunnel scenes and the flashbacks to rural Queensland quite differently in terms of the camera and the grade. All the war material was shot on Kodak 500T 5219, hand held and without filters other than 85's and ND for exteriors. For the tunnel scenes the stock was also force processed a stop and rated at 800 ISO. In contrast the Queensland scenes were shot on Kodak 200T 5217, rated at 100 ISO, only on tripod or dolly and with some Black Pro Mist diffusion filters on the lens. The grade also kept the Qld shots light and airy, with some desaturation – colourist Adrian Hauser called it the 'creamy' look.

The tunnels by nature were small, cramped and uncomfortable. What techniques did you use to remain true to this without losing your audience?

For the tunnels, Jeremy and I had a hard and fast rule from the beginning - the lens could never leave the confines of the space, or 'break the fourth wall' and shoot from outside into the set. Most of the time I was jammed into the tunnel with the Arricam cheek by jowl - or cheek by mattebox - with the actors, often more uncomfortable than they were! But this style gives an audience a real sense of being stuck in that dark and dangerous claustrophobia with the men.

How hard was the task of working with water for the camera department?

The camera dept did a great job keeping the cameras dry, really just with carefully applied plastic bags. We had full scale rain FX for some exterior trench scenes but it was also tricky dealing with the constant overhead dripping and dribbling in some of the underground sets like the main 'bomb room'. Basically like taking a shower for most of the day.

What kinds of challenges do you face shooting in such restricted locations?

Challenges included access issues getting in and out of the labyrinthine tunnel sets, there were many bumped heads on the first few days in there. The Arricam LT is a pretty compact 35mm sound camera but it still sometimes felt cumbersome and awkward in those tunnels.

Did you use different techniques for the war scenes and the personal storyline? Can you tell us a bit about how you evolved these particular looks?

The different looks evolved from my original 'mood boards' I put together in pre-production, where I selected works from a number of artists, painters like Van Gogh, Otto Dix and Paul Gauguin to illustrate my ideas for the various sections of the film that was in keeping with the sense of period. The boards were then later developed into photographic references - some screen grabs and stills from other war films - that I graded in Photoshop to illustrate the intended looks more precisely.

You've worked with director, Jeremy Sims before but this film is nothing like the last one you made together, 'Last Train to Freo', give us a bit of insight into the differences.

Well, it's chalk and cheese - one is a thriller all set in a train carriage with 5 actors and the other is a war thriller set mostly in a tunnel with 8 actors. No, really they are very different movies but they do have a common thread of the enclosed and dangerous situation which I think was something the producer, Bill Leimbach, spotted when he considered Sims to direct. I am just very pleased Jeremy asked me to collaborate again - I must have done all right with the first one!

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Reviewers are already tipping 'Beneath Hill 60' as a standout success for 2010. What was so good about it?

Really it is up to audiences to decide for themselves. But from my perspective I was very pleased the way all the crew and cast worked extremely well together to pull off an ambitious movie on schedule and as we intended creatively. I think when a crew and cast are really dedicated and committed it shows up on the screen in the final product.

Initially the film was going to be shot with Red cameras, but eventually shot on 35mm. What brought about that change?

The producers were fairly keen on the RED initially but I was particularly concerned about the low-light candlelit scenes holding up with that system and proposed shooting on film. Along with encouragement from post people like John Lee from Cutting Edge they re-jigged the budget and made the switch to 35mm in pre-production. We shot Super 35 3-perf to save 25% stock costs, with a 1:2.40 aspect ratio marked up but endeavoring to keep the full frame 16x9 3-perf area clear. In post we did have to deliver a full height (no letterbox) 16x9 HD video version - and even a 4x3(!) so the extra picture available above and below the 2.40 frame is invaluable in re-framing shots to fit those video formats.

Did your location prove problematical in receiving any technical support?

Despite being over 1000kms from their nearest office, Panavision's service and assistance to us was first-rate. Certainly no complaints from the camera crew.

How was the shooting schedule from the DOP's POV?

We had a 40 day shooting schedule over 7 weeks which is quite reasonable for the average Australian film but felt tight on this movie with the amount of SFX, night shoots and awkward sets. However, our 1st AD, Jamie Crooks, is one of the best, his experience and pleasant demeanour kept the pace flowing smoothly. The budget was in the mid-\$8 million AUD.

What were your major challenges in making that level of budget work for the complexity of the pictures you had to shoot?

Quite precise planning in pre-prod was needed to make the budget work for us. For example, we wanted a certain number of lighting boom lifts for several day and night sequences out on the exterior trenches location at Kelso, but the production couldn't allow us to keep all the lifts for the two or three weeks or so we were out there. So Miles Jones and I had to go through the schedule carefully and find the exact days where we needed two booms, or five booms, or none so they could send them back to the supplier, and of course redo it when the schedule changed. We were always looking for ways to save a bit of money here or there - with the camera package I had a cheaper zoom lens and no 6x6 mattebox or filters; on the lighting side I had a deal with Miles to restrict use of his 18K's to just a few days. Fortunately the lighting design for the big battlefield night shoots required no HMI, only tungsten lights so that helped keep costs down.

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Many bits and pieces from the film — props, sets, costumes and so on — are being left in Townsville to be donated to the Military Museum. What did you leave from the camera department?

Luckily none of the Panavision gear we had was quite that old that the museum was keen to get it, so we returned all of it back to Sydney!

What was your reaction on seeing the finished film and were you happy with the choices you made for the look overall?

Yes, I am very pleased with the way the finished film looks - the choices Jeremy and I made were deliberately in keeping with the nature of the story and the period, and I think that's a good place to be. But the DOP is only as good as their crew, and in this case Key Grip Berm Hyde, Gaffer Miles Jones, B Cam Operator Andre Deubel and Colorist Adrian Hauser, along with my visual collaborator Production Designer Clayton Jauncey were fundamentally important contributors to the cinematography.

What's your next project?

My next project is a somewhat smaller movie shoot in Melbourne in mid-year, and quite interesting for me as I am looking at using the new lightweight DSLR digital camera system - actually a very different project to BH60!

Other films featuring Toby as DOP include:

- 'The Combination' (Dir: David Field, 2008)
- 'Last Train to Freo' (Dir: Jeremy Sims, 2005)
- 'Em 4 Jay' (Dir: Alkinos Tsilimidos 2005)
- 'Tom White' (Dir: Alkinos Tsilimidos 2004)

He has won numerous notable cinematography awards.

Tech Info:

Beneath Hill 60

Cameras Arricam LT

Lenses Cooke S4 primes and Angenieux HR zoom