

F900Rs in Oz

Geoff Boyle used Sony F900Rs (and an F900/3) to shoot a spot for British Airways in Sydney – while trying to conceal that he was shooting anything but a bit of standard news footage.

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It's a horrible cold February morning. Looking out my window, the sea is grey, the sky is grey, I can't even see the horizon; it's all so bloody grey and depressing.

The phone rings, it's Simon Hunter, director of *Mutant Chronicles*, which I shot last year. Do I fancy shooting a British Airways commercial with him? Do I? Hmm, thoughts of my last BA commercial: Caribbean for two weeks, helicopters, Louma, underwater unit, four film cameras. Oh, I guess I could be persuaded.

Ah no, says Simon, we're going to be shooting it digitally. Simon! I know you love digital, but this is a BA commercial! You know, Caribbean, helicopters, etc. No, we're not going to the Caribbean, it's Sydney. Well OK, I like Sydney. But digital. He's thinking of six Panavision Genesis cameras or six Grass Valley Vipers – they'll have to be brought in from LA, as they don't have them in Sydney, but which would I prefer? He'd quite like the Genesis as we just finished a film with Vipers.

Tell me more about the story, what are we shooting?

It's going to be in a busy place, to be finalized, and we'll have real cabin staff, pilots, baggage handlers, etc, descending on an unsuspecting population and offering them drinks, cold towels, newspapers and help with their bags. The idea is "wouldn't it be nice if life was like a BA flight?". It's not going to be staged, we're doing it all for real.

OK, I can see why we're going digital, the footage will be huge, making film a non-starter. We're going to have camera hidden so we aren't seen and, whoa! Hang on a moment! If we're doing it for real and we don't want people to react to the cameras, then hiding them in huge tents isn't going to work, people will see the tents and react to them. What we need to do is hide in full view of everyone. What we need for this job is the Sony F900.

What! Simon falls off his chair in shock. "But you hate them," he says. No, I just hate them when they're used for things they're not very good at. For this, they're perfect. We'll put them on lightweight legs with just an operator and an AC, and nobody will look twice. They're just another news crew; we see them all the time, they're part of the furniture.

I know they use a compressed recording system and all the other reasons not to use them if you're going to do a lot of post work, but for this there isn't going to be a huge amount of post work, just a normal 'make them look great' approach. So, the general approach is agreed. Panavision Sydney will provide the kit, and we'll refine it when we get out there.

As I'm flying out – Qantas, there was no room on BA – it starts to dawn on me that this is going to be a technical nightmare. Not only do we have to lock all the cameras together, we also have to feed them all with audio and send pictures back from them to a central viewing area that is far enough away from where we're shooting that it won't be noticed. All those signals bouncing around; all those chances for a right royal screw-up. Err, where's that cabin attendant? I need more wine!

Not only that, I've got to get hold of camera operators who are really good, but who can also react in an instant when something happens. I need people who have started in news/docos and then moved to commercials and features: lot's of me! Some of them are already in place, people I've known for a good while; others come from the local production company.

I have 10 days to recce and get the kit together. The budget was for seven, but I said if they paid the hotels and per diems I'd do the extra three for free! I must have been drunk. The hotel we're booked in to is part of a complex that also contains Russell Crowe's apartment; I'll keep my eye open for flying phones.

I go out to Panavision to start the kit finalizing. No guys, I don't want F900/3s, I want the F900Rs. On the subject of lenses, we need long lenses; I mean LONG. We start with the Fuji 18X with doublers and then add a 42X stabilized lens, then a Canon 150-600. It's at this point I run in to trouble. There are people saying that the Canon won't match the Fujis. It's softer; they've measured it, OK, any problems with measuring it? Well, they had to wait for no wind and a cold day because wind and high temperatures would affect the image. Really! And where are we shooting? Circular Quay, from 10am to 4pm. Well, no chance of high temperatures there then! Not if you count 35C as cold.

The next problems are T/C, audio and video assist. Nothing to worry about there then.

We decide that we have to use external T/C units that we will lock to video and to an outside master clock, which will also lock the audio. The audio is simple: record to hard disk for real but feed that to all the cameras via radio mikes. The video then gets harder; the distances are too much for normal video assist. We have to go microwave using the same systems that are used to feed pictures of ocean racing yachts back to shore.

I have to give a round of applause to my Australian crew; they were brilliant. I am particularly indebted to David Knight, who knew where all the F900Rs were and bullied Panavision for me. Even so, we ended up with one F900/3 and the differences were amazing: a lot of tweaking in the grade to match it.

I guess that brings me to what I did to make the pictures easier to grade. Because of the extreme contrast, I was obviously unable to use any fill light. I decided to load a very low contrast gamma curve into the cameras. This was the Cinelog curve by Steve Shaw, and it made sure I could hold both the highlights on the Opera House and the shadows under the Harbour Bridge.

We had a few problems loading the curves I had taken with me. They were formatted for the F900/3 and the F900R was slightly different, but the techs at Panavision managed to fix this. Thanks guys.

I then spent about a week just walking around, looking at the light at the proposed locations and seeing how many people there were and how the shots would work. That's why I asked to move to outside the Museum of Modern Art. It was chaos outside, really busy, plus they had a high roof where I could really go mad with the 42X!

Apart from the main section outside the Museum, we also had single camera establishing elements to be shot at Sydney Harbour Bridge, Mrs Macquarie's Chair and, of course, the helicopter shots.

Of course, as usual the shot that caused me the most pain – literally, I twisted my ankle badly which is why I'm sitting in the group shot – never made it in to the final edit. Hasta la vista, Mrs Macquarie!

So finally, it was the first day of the shoot. A splinter unit was off and shooting under the bridge at dawn while the main unit set up at MOMA. As soon as the bridge shots were done, we rushed to join the main unit.

We had a number of tents for monitoring, the first was for the legendary John Hegarty, Mark and Molly the producers, Simon and myself. It had six Panasonic monitors and we had radio contact with everyone. The next two tents had feeds of the two most overall types of shots; these were for BA and the cast. I think the nice way of saying it is that we had a technical area and a client area! We also had a hard disk recording of all of the cameras to SD level for instant spot checks.

I think we were all genuinely amazed when the first day went off without hitch and we were getting exactly what we had planned! Of course, during day two one of the clients saw my Astro, which was giving a true picture of what we were recording – flat, desaturated grey, rather than the tweaked picture on their monitors. A minor panic ensued, but it was dealt with by a quick demo in a TK suite.

We shot for a further couple of days and did more establishers. We tried to make things go wrong, we really did, but not a fault. The worst thing was that I had to switch operators around – one of our guys just wasn't used to working in such a chaotic environment, but he did terrific work on the crane and in the helicopter.

I mention the chaotic environment. That's because we'd see something happen on one camera and be screaming at the other cameras to get there as well. Of course, this was a totally Zen, peaceful environment compared to channel two on the walkies. This was where the PAs lived, the poor bastards, who had to catch up with people we'd filmed and get them to sign releases. "The one in the red – no not that one, the other one, no! Not him!" It was definitely a channel to avoid.

A great shoot and a totally appropriate use of the technology. Let the script decide what kit you use; don't try and force the kit on the shoot. Thirty-plus hours of rushes make it very clear that digital was the way to go; the lack of reaction to the cameras endorses the choice of news looking cameras, and the final pictures are the real answer!



Geoff Boyle

Reel Show cinematography editor Geoff Boyle's recent feature films as director of photography include *The Mutant Chronicles*, *Dark Country* and, currently, *Street Fighter 2*. He received his first camera, a Brownie 127, when he was eight. From then on the future was clear. After art school in the late 60s, he worked as a stills assistant. One day he was asked if he knew anyone who could film a concert. Of course he did! He moved into film and shot documentaries for TV, 10 years or so of *20/20* for ABC and a lot of music videos. In 1985 he shot a 'making of' about the Pirelli calendar. Terence Donovan liked the way he lit and asked him if he shot commercials. From 1990 to 2005, he has shot almost entirely commercials, with occasional sidetrips into drama, a short he shot – *About A Girl* – winning a BAFTA in 2001. He also shot special effects on *Enemy at the Gates*, won the SMPTE Eastman Gold medal in 2000 and was made a fellow of the BKSTS that year. He started the cinematography mailing list (CML) in 1996 with 60 members. It now has over 3,000 members in 148 countries and is acknowledged as the pre-eminent internet site for cinematography.