

Less is more

by Mike Ross

During the mid to late eighties I was living and working out of Dubai in the Middle East, at the time this was, and no doubt still is, the central hub for commercial diving companies servicing the offshore oil and Gas industry in and around the Middle East and India. My introduction to the Scoones housed camera systems started with a project run by one of the larger oilfield diving companies in Dubai of that time 'Oceaneering'

I had been hired previously as a diver/photo-tech with Fraser diving out of their Singapore division, that particular project was based off of Labuan in Borneo. Their choice of weapon primarily being the Nikonos cameras and strobes combined with C-4 print process.

As I was also a keen amateur fish photographer and owned my own Nikonos V (c/w various strobes & lenses) the arrangement was that I would start as diver/photo-tech until the 'real photo-tech' turned up a week later. As it transpired I was really pleased to see him as was the rest of the team as my inexperience was beginning to show and I was falling behind with intense work-load. Setting up and generally looking after the camera gear was simple enough, however processing often hundreds of negatives per day along with contact sheets for each roll of film plus a certain amount of full sized prints was a full time job in itself and of course every image had to be documented or logged as to its precise location, time, date, etc, no metadata or GPS options back in the good old days.

So it came as a welcome relief to slip back into the totally irresponsible life style of an ordinary



All of the underwater images were taken with my home-built housing pictured. I either attach the housing to one of the subs or dangle it from a rope while the fish are feeding near the surface. The housing is built from an 8" ID marine ali tube (ex ROV ballast tank) it's extremely rugged & weighs 18 kg!! I have a Mk II almost finished but still 8 kg+

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deep sea diver again, sitting in the standby chair with my headset on, tending hose, swimming around for a living, sheer luxury. We actually had a lot of fun on that job, good camaraderie with a mixed team of Brits and Americans most of whom lived in South East Asia. The water conditions were calm and fantastically clear with abundant marine life and some of the largest and most fearsome looking Barracuda I have ever





seen. Labuan was a good run ashore too, the locals were friendly and accommodating and we were always welcome at the Relax Lounge in the centre of town. On the outskirts of Labuan there's also a huge and beautifully manicured tropical garden that is the war memorial for the allied troops killed during the Japanese invasion of 1945, there are a few Victoria cross hero's but mostly unmarked headstones of soldiers "known only to God"

It would have been sometime

in 1986 by the time I had moved onto the Oceaneering job and by this time I had a better idea of what I was letting myself in for. The job at hand was fairly routine, mainly CVI (close visual inspection) photography of a designated number of the sub-sea welded 'Nodes'. These Nodes are the junction points of the large tubular steel members that make up the structure of the offshore 'fixed jackets or platforms' (fixed meaning piled into the seabed). This was a common part of the routine annual or



biannual survey ensuring the integrity of the structures mainly for insurance purposes. The survey would also record the density and type of marine growth and condition of the subsea cathodic protection system, in this case the large ingots of zinc alloy 'Anodes' that were attached to the various steel tubular 'members' that made up the platform.

We would have been in UAE waters which generally had good visibility and rarely got any deeper than around 180 feet, I do remember having to come back into Sharjah port as we had a fire on-board requiring some repairs. This job was fairly typical with around 20 divers split between two shifts for 24 hour operations. Roughly half of the divers

were classified as construction types who did most of the hard graft high pressure water blasting of the marine growth, followed by the grit blasting of the designated weld and HAZ (heat affected zone) to around 100 mm either side of the weld. The rest of the team were qualified underwater inspection divers CSWIP (certification scheme for welding Inspection Personnel) who would work with not only the sub-sea cameras but also the MPI (Magnetic Particle Inspection) gear and the digital UT (Ultrasonic Thickness) equipment.

On this project we had two other guys working back to back as designated data recorders or inspection co-ordinators, it was their job to make sure we were surveying

the correct weld, anode, marine growth at a specific location on a given platform. They would also be responsible for logging and organizing all of the information, including video, stills, UT measurements, MPI data on & on to present to the client as our end product. So this was good for the photo-techs, as all we had to do was look after the cameras and process the film with a bit of underwater swimming thrown in for good measure.

While we did have a couple of Nikonos cameras as emergency back up our main work horse was the Scoones housed Olympus OM-1. This was my first experience with this system but straight away I could see by it's rugged, black hard anodized design that it was built for commercial divers. And perhaps best of all there was only one external control, the shutter release so once the optimal settings for a given situation were locked in there was absolutely zero opportunity for accidental (or intentional) interference possible. As an added bonus after hundreds of hours logged working with these housings I never once had to deal with the much dreaded watery surprise when opening the lid.

There was actually a single bulkhead penetrator that was used to pair the system with a strobe, this had the industry standard connector of the

time a single pin, two way Impulse or EO connector. The camera also came with a pair of stainless steel rods or stand-off probes that screwed into either side of the front port retainer used for close up work to assist with depth of field issues.

While the Scoones housed OM-1 was the go to camera for most general photo survey work, and we had four of them on this project we also had a number of purpose built close up cameras. These were bulk spool (200 frames plus) outfits mounted in a narrow (100 mm ish OD) black, anodised, alloy tubular housing. The flat port had a ring flash mounted internally while externally there was a handy pistol grip complete with trigger. I vaguely remember them being called 'Hydroscans' but I may be getting mixed up with another unit.

This camera was strictly for close up work and had two stainless rods mounted permanently at the front end and was used to produce 'weld mosaics'. Once the weld had been cleared of marine growth and then grit blasted back to 'bright shiny' metal the inspection diver would attach a purpose built magnetic backed measuring tape adjacent to the full length or circumference of the designated weld.

Then the diver would photograph the entire weld using the spread of the probes (roughly 6 inches) on the





tape measure also ensuring a 50% overlap of each frame. So once the allotted ID of the weld had been recorded with the first two frames the first picture of the weld would start with the right hand probe at 3 inches on the tape measure, then 6, then 9 and so on. Having 200 frames capability was the real strength of this outfit plus, as with the Scoones unit, it was pretty much bullet proof.

The film used on most of these projects around this time was 35 mm E-6 processed Ektachrome 64

ISO and we had complete photographic dark rooms with rotary tub chemical baths, enclosed heated drying racks, light boxes, with those one piece magnifying glass tube thingos that would glide across your newly processed slides all the cool stuff!

That particular Oceaneering project was a big success with the camera gear performing practically without fault and as it was a lump sum project brought in early we all received \$1000 bonus which was a lot of money in those days, even for us deep sea divers on rock star wages.

The follow-up project with the same company didn't fare so well photographically speaking. Within the first week both Scoones housed cameras were cast into Davey Jones Locker, lost forever as the work basket containing them was up-ended as it became snagged on the down line on the way to surface (and yes they did have lanyards with Carabinas) the boys hadn't thought to clip them into the basket.

I had to make the call to the office to explain the situation; fortunately the photographic side of this project was minimal. So as a make shift solution they sent out a single Nikonos V. As the water depth was in excess of the cameras recommended parameters I sent it into the fellows in the Saturation chamber via the med lock with the back of the camera and strobe left open to equalize them closer to the working depth. The following morning I was told there were yet more camera related issues and promptly made my way to the photo-shack to confronted with the sad remains.

The night shift supervisor in his wisdom had instructed the fellows to send the Nikonos up from seabed in the work basket, of course both camera and strobe exploded and with such force

that neither unit could be salvaged not to mention being completely flooded. "Yeah hello, yes it's me again the photo tech ... ermmm you know that brand new Nikonos gear you sent out just yesterday well"

Some thirty years on I'm still in the industry with a sudden renewed interest in underwater photography and have recently even built a few experimental SLR housings of my own. It's funny all these years down the track I also have a renewed appreciation and respect for the true engineering genius of the Scoones design It's all about taking care of business with the minimum amount of fuss, simplicity in itself. In this case, and in my humble opinion, less really is more.

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