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HELIFILMS

High definition film work

Helifilms

Capturing 'the moment' from the air.

Part one of a two-part series.

Helifilms are a production company adept at capturing high definition footage from helicopters. **Benn Marks** finds out about how the pilot, film director and cameraman make a special flight crew of three.

If a picture tells a thousand words, what can we say a motion picture tells?

Especially one shot from the air?

If you were to see dynamic footage of a visually impressive commercial or movie – both shot from the air using a high-tech camera – 'stunning' and 'extraordinary' are perhaps just two of the words you would start the brainstorming session with.

And capturing commercial and movie 'moments' is something Melbourne-based company Helifilms is renowned for.

In fact, Helifilms' name is synonymous with cinematography – but with one crucial difference. A large part of the company's photography and filmwork is shot from the air. It is also possibly the aerial film production industry's peak performer. And Helifilms' proof is in the pudding. Simply ask last year's organisers of the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa of its live sports aerial football coverage, or BBC executives about the soon-to-be-released follow up to the award-winning 'Planet Earth' series *Human Planet*, or even the creative team responsible for the 2009 box office smash *District 9*, and you get some idea of Helifilms' aerial film expertise.

And for evidence closer to home, you need look no further than the 2006 Commonwealth Games aerial coverage and the Royal Australian Navy's (RAN) 2008 recruitment ad campaign, where a Collins Class submarine bursts from the depths of a fairly turbulent sea to be flanked by a team of zodiac-riding commandos. The footage was shot from the air off the coast of Western Australia and captured the submarine from a distinctive and unique perspective.

Helifilms has a multitude of other works to its creative credit too, ranging from feature films and TV dramas to light entertainment, commercials and live broadcasts. However, regardless of the company's portfolio, you are

bound to see stunning aerial coverage of a range of different subjects, either close-up or distant.

At a more technical level, the Helifilms camera system responsible for such visually captivating material is the highly sophisticated Cineflex V14 gyro-stabilised HD camera system. And as far as film production camera systems go, the Cineflex is the most stable system on the market.

The Cineflex V14 camera system consists of an integrated Sony HDC 1500 camera and a Fujinon lens. The main intelligence of this sophisticated system is the Cineflex V14 gimbal, which is digitally gyro-stabilised on five axes. When mounted to the nose of a helicopter for filming purposes (the entire camera equipment itself can weigh anywhere from 75 to115 kilograms), it can move a full 360 degrees independent of the helicopter's position, which provides enormous scope for what can be shot from the air.

Another significant feature of the system is its rock-solid stability. For instance, under high-frequency vibration or sudden movement from the helicopter, the gyro-stabilised gimbal will compensate, ensuring that all images captured are completely 'sharp' and incredibly stable.

The Cineflex V14 gyro-stabilised HD camera system can also be mounted on cars, boats, fixed wing aircraft, cranes and blimps, further increasing its filming options over a range of shooting platforms. The combination of its stability and its extensive shooting range means it can be used to capture practically anything under the sporting, documentary, recreational and entertainment spheres.

However, for most aerial shooting purposes, the gimbal (including HD camera) is normally attached to the nose of a helicopter, typically a Bell (JetRanger, LongRanger, 407, 212 or 412) or Eurocopter AS350 and 355 'Squirrel' on custom-built and approved mounts. Because of its relatively diminutive size, sleek design and versatility, it is able to shoot at speeds of up to 200 knots.

But besides being an incredibly stable integrated filming platform, it also possesses an extremely long and powerful zoom lens. This gives the user a virtually unlimited High Definition 'point and shoot' capability; regardless of whether your subject matter is close-up or distant, all images will be captured in stunning visual detail and clarity. It also translates into a virtually limitless range of creative filming options for the aerial unit commander and film production crews.

Jerry Grayson, Helifilms' founder, chair and aerial unit commander, says Cineflex cameras provide him with a comprehensive range of filming options that earlier camera models couldn't offer.

"The whole game is a pure 3D chess game in which you need to put movement into. You also need to be aware of all foreground and background movement that's occurring too," he said.

"Basically, Cineflex cameras give you unbelievable stability, with a longer lens", he said.

"And what that means is that it enables you to create shots that no one's ever seen before; basically, you're creating shots that you can't create from the ground."

Many examples of Helifilms' aerial photographic work are also unique and impressive because they manage to capture that elusive 'moment'.

Keen photographers and artistic directors will ask "How is that possible?"

Grayson will tell you it's a combination of helicopter, camera equipment, having 'an eye' for what makes a good shot, a good pilot/cameraman relationship and, of course, luck.

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CINEFLEX


Telkom
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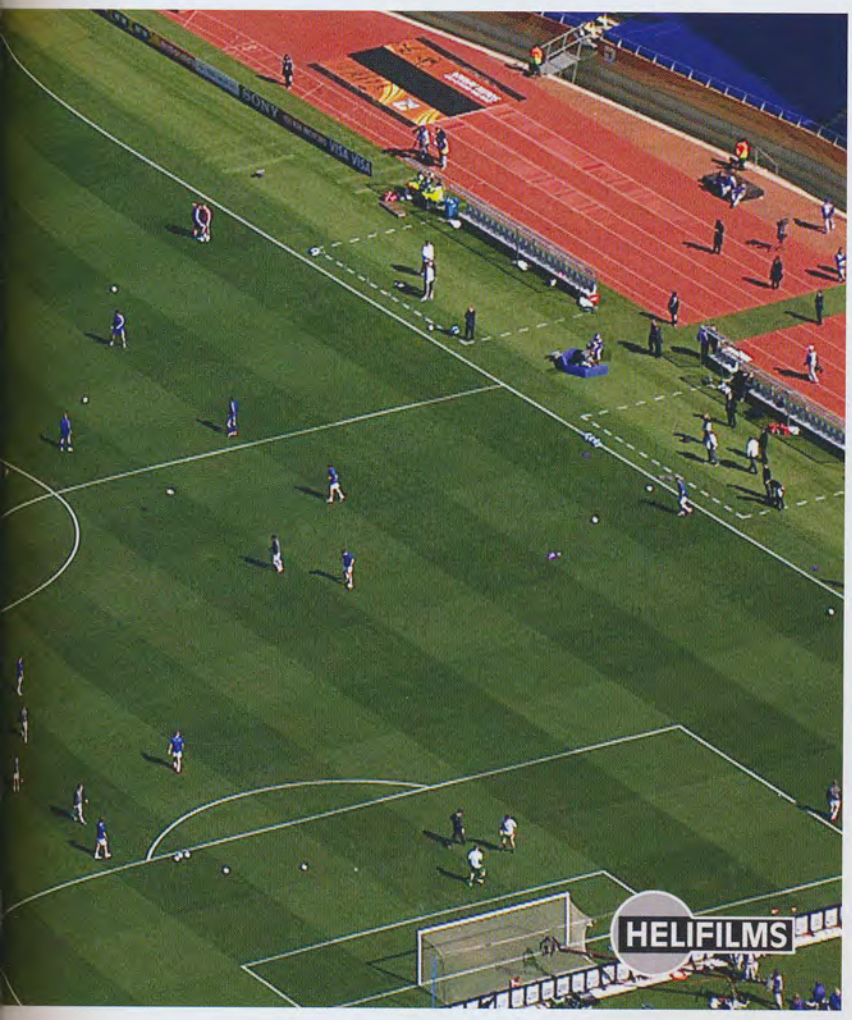
Filming the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.



> "The pilot communicates what he's doing and there's very little time for words, so the cameraman anticipates the next helo move from the preceding move and the pilot similarly anticipates the next camera move from the preceding camera move. I call it 'economical communication'."

And aerial photography isn't for the faint-hearted or incompetent. It requires the blending of an expert artisan's touch, with a skilled aviator who can anticipate where and what will make an ideal aerial shot.

In this respect, Grayson says a good relationship between pilot and cameraman is crucial, as both "need to concentrate very hard and communicate very efficiently" to allow the pilot to set up the shot while the cameraman takes it.

Grayson further adds the relationship between the cameraman and pilot is at the very heart of what Helifilms is about: a professionally compatible relationship between the two that will produce a finished film 'product' that's both high quality and memorable. "The pilot communicates what he's doing and there's very little time for words, so the cameraman anticipates the next helo move from the preceding move and the pilot similarly anticipates the next camera move from the preceding camera move.

"You're each reading the movements of the other because there's not enough time to convert that to words. I call it 'economical communication'. So a relationship that's predicated on efficient communication between the two players in the helicopter will in turn have consequences for what we capture."

The Helifilms chair says a typical example of a sound pilot/cameraman way of shorthand communication is the 'Miami Vice move'.

This shot consists of the camera pointing downward, filming a rushing landscape below, which ultimately pans up to reveal the subject in the distance.

Grayson explains that a typical aerial film shoot lasts up to 2.5 hours, and consists of a flight crew of three: the pilot (who has to possess a working knowledge of camera systems), a cameraman and a film director.

The flying profiles adopted (both speed and altitude) depend largely on the type of job being flown, although altitudes can range anywhere from 5 to 1500 feet, while speeds, similarly, range from hover to just before Velocity Never Exceed (Vne).

Grayson adds the perfect aerial shots are either captured at dawn or dusk, and timing is critical as there is often

Filming the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.
Inset: the Cineflex V14 gyro-stabilised HD camera system.

nothing more than a five-minute opportunity in which to capture 'the moment'. "It's just before dawn and just before dusk where everything looks richer. There's more contrast and the light has a golden quality to it, and everything looks cleaner and brighter," he said.

Like others in the trade, the Helifilms chair refers to it as the "golden hour". Grayson, who learned to fly helicopters in the British Royal Navy between 1972 and 1979, before his departure into the creative pastures of aerial film work and photography, said the last six months of his naval service prepped him for what he does now.

"The BBC was doing a documentary on Naval SAR (Search and Rescue) operations, so my last six months in the Navy were spent doing film work for them. I basically had to become aware of the needs of the camera and story telling, so it was a natural progression into the craft."

Grayson established Castle Air in the UK in 1980, which he describes as "a helicopter charter company that moved into flying for film and TV productions". Besides providing aerial photography coverage for motion pictures, Castle Air also produced a steady output of work in other areas, such as TV documentaries and car commercials.

And with a rapidly growing body of creative work to Castle Air's name, the company was chosen to provide all of the aerial film work for the Sarajevo Winter Olympics in 1984 and the aerial filming sequences (the blimp scenes) for *A View to a Kill* with Roger Moore the following year.

After more film work, and a desire to "focus purely on flying and directing productions from the aerial perspective", Grayson departed Castle Air and formed Helifilms in 1989 – the next logical step in his plans to capitalise and build on his existing aerial film work production and photography experience.

Large filming commissions followed, with the company scoring another major sporting event when it was asked by the Athens Olympics organising committee to provide all of the aerial coverage for the Games, including the sailing events, outside races and opening and closing ceremonies. The company used 10 helicopters for the event (seven AS355 and three AS350 Squirrels).

In 2005, Helifilms went to the US to cover New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Grayson captured the devastation the hurricane caused from an altitude of 1500 feet and saw the devastation first hand.

The material Helifilms took of New Orleans that year has been used under license by third party media companies for documentary-making purposes ever since.

Helifilms retains all its footage, both stills and movie footage (in both 35mm and HD formats), which is professionally stored as archival material in its library and provided to those wishing to use it via its agents, Getty Images and Corbis Motion.

When reviewing Grayson's CV, Helifilms' scope or works, and the backbone of its film production capabilities – the Cineflex V14 gyrostabilised HD camera system – it's quite easy to see how flying helicopters and aerial photography go hand-in-hand.

It's a perfect creative synthesis between two highly technical areas and the results speak for themselves.

And hopefully for the rest of us, the highly experienced Grayson will remain at Helifilms' helm for some time yet, delivering incredible imagery that is stunning and extraordinary to truly capture the moment. **HN.**