Short Takes

The Waning Days of World War II

by Stephanie Argy

Right: David (Clayton M. Nemrow) is one of two Americans shot down behind enemy lines in the German short film *Die Letzten Tage*. Below: First assistant Thomas Fleissner (left) and cinematographer Thomas Bergmann (right) mount a Panasonic DVX100 on the VariCam to record a "tracking pass."

In the short film *Die Letzten Tage* (*The Last Days*), set in Germany during the final days of World War II, two American pilots and one German deserter find themselves hiding together in an abandoned farmhouse, and the combatants must overcome their initial distrust of each other in order to have even a chance at survival. Made as a student project at the Film Academy Baden-Württemberg, the short was shot by Thomas Bergmann, who used a Panasonic VariCam and later did all the color correction himself.

Set in April 1945, the movie begins as a B-17 is shot down over Germany and the crew parachutes out. It's clear that the Allies will soon take over the country, and Germany has ordered its teenagers and old men to patrol near the front and execute any deserters on the spot. Two Americans, David (Clayton M. Nemrow) and Ben (Jeff Burrell), watch from a distance as a German patrol kills one of their crewmates in cold blood, a shocking act that makes them realize how badly they need a place to hide.

To convey the peril of the Americans' situation, Bergmann and director Oliver Frohnauer decided to shoot the project in a rough, handheld style, as though the camera is a person following the Americans. "To tell the story, I think it was very important to be close to the actors and have maximum camera movement, as well as movement in the foreground," says Bergmann.

The approach they took to the narrative forced them to reconsider their choice of shooting format, however. Bergmann initially wanted to shoot on 35mm, but the project's budget didn't provide for enough film. "It was clear we'd need to shoot lots of footage to achieve the concept we had in mind," he says. The previous year, he had shot a project for Frohnauer using a Panasonic

Germans close in on David's fellow gunner, Ben (Jeff Burrell).

AJ-SDX900 in DVCPro50 mode, with a P+S Technik adapter and Zeiss Superspeed 35mm lenses. Pleased with the results, the filmmakers decided to do some tests for *Die Letzten Tage* with a Panasonic VariCam, a P+S Technik Pro35 adapter and Zeiss Superspeeds, all provided by MBF Frankfurt. Bergmann was particularly interested in finding out whether the camera could be mobile enough for their purposes, and how many assistants he would need to make the shoot go smoothly. "I learned that I would need two assistants, including one who only worked with the monitor, and that I would need remote follow focus. And I discovered that I really wanted to shoot on this format, because I wasn't sure before." (Some of Bergmann's test material actually appears in the final cut.) After he found out how heavy the VariCam/adapter/lens combination was, Bergmann decided to do much of his operating using an Easyrig, a body-mounted camera-support device.
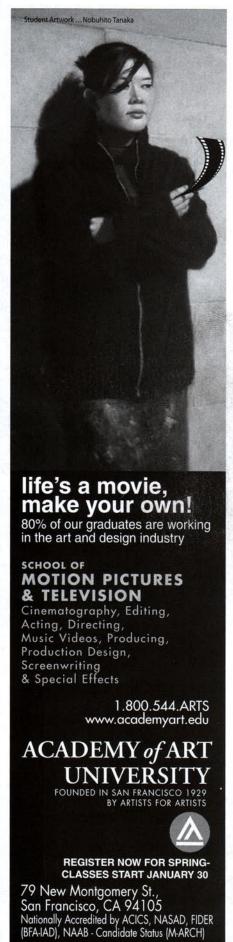
The shoot lasted 13 days and took place in a small town called Gschwend. All but three of the Germans in the movie were played by natives of the area where the movie was shot, and some knew of real incidents like the one depicted in *Die Letzten Tage*. According to Bergmann, the location — a house

and the surrounding grounds — belonged to an old woman who had moved out, leaving the house furnished but in a state of disrepair. "We painted the walls but did very little to the stuff inside," he recalls.

The filmmakers got a lucky break when they came across Eugen Kiemele, who lived in a nearby village, Frickenhofen. "Kiemele is a collector of old things — old planes, helicopters and tanks are crowding his place, rotting away," says Bergmann. Amid the collection was a partial fuselage, which Kiemele loaned to the production for free.

Bergmann shot *Die Letzten Tage* at a 1.85:1 aspect ratio because he felt the VariCam's 16x9 chip wouldn't accommodate a wider format. "We talked about shooting CinemaScope, but I didn't like wiping away half the resolution," he explains. "That's for a future project; we'll figure out how to do it digitally."

He used Zeiss 18mm, 25mm, 35mm, 50mm and 85mm lenses, Macro 50mm and 100mm lenses, and a Century T2.8 300mm. Because the Pro35 adapter takes away about two stops of light, the combination of the VariCam and the adapter gave Bergmann an effective ASA of about 200. He used different shutter angles throughout the movie,

and although he didn't use filtration on the lens, he tungsten-balanced the camera to give daylight scenes a blue tint.

During the shoot, Bergmann set up the camera to capture a neutral image in Cine Gamma mode. "I went for a very linear gamma curve between black and white. You see what's coming from the set, which is very saturated." He also diligently used a vectorscope on set.

Frohnauer and Bergmann carefully worked out a number of their shots together. "We had half of the film sketched, and we developed the other half on set," says the cinematographer. "All the camera motion was made in collaboration with Oliver; I think all the decisions were made on the fly, as a reaction to the actors." One pivotal scene, which takes place behind the house at the end of the movie, "was done quite by improvisation," he adds.

To maintain a naturalistic look, Bergmann used very soft light. One device he found particularly helpful was the Bag-o-Light, made by Licht-Technik in Munich, which he used for exteriors and on outdoor sources for interior shots. "They're very long softboxes that you put before the lamp. They look like condoms with air in them, and they go in front of an Arri 6K Par. There's also a reflector on the other side, which gives off a nice soft light."

The story of the Americans begins with shots of planes in the sky and then shows parachutes drifting to the ground. The planes and parachutes were all CG models made by Black Mountain Studios in Stuttgart, and Bergmann worked closely with the effects artists as the models were developed. "3-D effects are a big part of the curriculum at Film Academy, so I knew about motion control and tracking," says Bergmann.

To help the effects team track the motion of the handheld camera without having to paint out tracking marks, Bergmann mounted a Panasonic DVX100EG on top of the VariCam, pointing in a different direction from the main camera. This second camera shot tracking marks that were positioned off to the side, out of the A-camera's view. "It recorded a separate tracking path," says Bergmann. "Because the offset between the VariCam and DVX100 was fixed and measured before, the effects guys just had to do some mathematics to get the correct motion data for the VariCam."

Frohnauer and editor Stefan Roth cut *Die Letzten Tage* on an Avid in standard-definition video. When they finished, they provided Bergmann with an edit decision list, and he did the online and color correction himself, using Apple Final Cut Pro with Synthetic Aperture Color Finesse. "I've used the system for many commercials," says Bergmann. "It's very precise but rather slow." It took him about three weeks to do the color correction on one of the school's Apple G5s, but much of that time was spent waiting for shots to render. He also experimented with two different approaches to the color correction, one a very blue, saturated look, and the other a cool, desaturated look. He ultimately chose the latter. At that point, he was working with the actual high-definition footage, upconverted to 1080p.

Last spring, Bergmann won the Caligari Prize, presented by Friends of the Baden-Württemberg Film Academy, for his work on *Die Letzten Tage*, and the film has been shown at several events commemorating the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II. "The movie captures the meaning of 1945, and it was quite a hard time for Germans," he observes. ∎