



Pole to Pole

By Simon Priestman

How is it that when the phone is quiet you end up with a commercial for 'Freshy Fries – Fried in a Fresh Way' or 2nd camera interiors for 'Sleepy Land Beds'? Then, when you're really busy with work, the most exciting jobs come in!

So, I am already juggling my days when the phone rings. "Hi Simon, I'll have to make the call quick because I'm using the sat phone. We're shooting a feature film with Sean Bean here in Norway, and we'd like you to come out with your Jimmy Jib to cover a climbing sequence. Are you free?"

Er, hello? ... Free for Adventure?!

It seems due to this job's unusually isolated location, communications were proving to be more difficult than usual. Sat phone calls are definitely more frustrating than regular mobiles, as the caller's voice seems to drift in and out as if it's carried by the wind.

So, trying to glean information from the production office, which seemed to be based on a ship was,

shall we say, tricky.

A further call went on to say "...er yes, just shoot... down into... crevasse...wh.... get....t.....on the glacier...we need you here ready to shoot on...Monday."

The glacier! Right... next Monday, and today is Tuesday.

So, the rather general location of Norway turned out to be... where else but Svalbard!

OK, I'd not heard of it either, but it's 78 degrees north and well within the Arctic Circle and only one hour flying time from your actual North Pole.

It transpired this was to be a sequence for a new picture *True North*, a co-production with Freeze Frame, the PJB Picture Company and Channel 4 Films starring Sean Bean,

Michelle Yeoh (*Memoirs of a Geisha*) and Michelle Krusiek (*Gray's Anatomy, Daddy Day Care*). It was being shot by the BAFTA award-winning team of producer Bertrand Faivre, director Asif Kapadia and DoP Roman Osin.

The script described how Michelle Krusiek's character, Anja, had been captured by four soldiers. She is led across a frozen glacier. Frost bitten and weary, the troop are tied to one another by a hemp rope. Anja sees her chance to escape, and cutting herself free, pulls the four disparate soldiers into a deep crevasse.

At the last second, the lead soldier manages to piton into the top of the crevasse with his ice axe, shouting and screaming, they all hang from this one fixture! Anja looks down on

them, leans forward, and cuts their rope.

There had been a tech-recce of the crevasse by helicopter. The key grip, Rupert Lloyd-Parry, had suggested the best way of getting Anja's point of view and getting down the rope to see the actors struggling to survive. Perhaps they could use a Techno Crane or maybe a Jimmy Jib might just work.

For my part, having done previous work on snowfields, glaciers, up mountains and in generally difficult locations, I knew there were going to



Main picture: The Jimmy Jib on Svae, below left: Simon Priestman with the pulk, below right the Jib on the beach



be a number of issues that I had to immediately resolve: How cold is it? What's the surface of the glacier like? What's the access? Who's the safety officer? So many questions and no time! None of these questions really did get answered because it was so difficult to establish communications with the 'front line'. Everything was by sat phone or the occasional text message.

I decided to employ the good services of Simon Edwards as my jib assistant. Although not exactly a mountain man, Simon knows Jimmy Jibs really well. He is also very dependable in a crisis, not that we ever have a crisis you understand!

Simon and I immediately went to see those great people at

Cotswold Outdoor in South Cerney to stock up on those essential glacial items like crampons, ice screws, hot gel packs for the batteries and sticks of toffee for us. I currently use the A&C Pee-Pod 500 remote head for my main Jimmy Jib. This three-axis head is beautifully engineered, rugged and very, very powerful, so is ideally suited to having a 35mm camera strapped to it. I drove to Harrow to see Frank Fletcher at A&C Ltd to have the head checked over and to sort a flight case for it.

Thankfully this meant that I established the head has been tested to minus 18 and should therefore stand up well in what would be autumn arctic conditions

Excess baggage

As much as production would have liked, there obviously wasn't any time left to ship the crane by cargo. Sure enough the very next day we were at Heathrow in full airport struggle mode as we tried to check in a complete camera crane!

It was at that point Simon reminded me that there is as a single case weight limit of 32 kilos. In the overall rush to leave I had completely



Left: The shore party, right: Longyearbyen, below: The Svae Glacier



forgotten this simple fact.

While based in the UK and working out of my VW Transporter, we generally seem to manage to schlep the Jimmy Jib around in a series of flight cases that each weigh more than the earth itself. Why would I need to worry about case weights?

So here we were at the SAS desk having to repack the entire kit. Luckily I had packed a large rucksack, but the wheels had to leave the security and comfort of their case, and, however upset they were, they had to be ticketed separately.

At the same time, somehow, the carnet managed to materialise having been brilliantly organised by Dynamic in less than two hours! I ran out and met the rep outside Terminal Three, leaving Simon still fighting with flight cases and camera tape.

It was a very close thing but we managed to join scheduled flights from London to Oslo, Oslo to Tromso and Tromso to Longyearbyen.

Longyearbyen

Thankfully, the complete Jimmy Jib seemed to have made it. Inside a three room fluorescent-lit terminal building we met with Emma Murphy the production co-ordinator.

Emma showed us to a small van that she had managed to borrow from a painter. There were the keys, simply left in the ignition. It started first time but the engine wasn't that happy with being there. Also, the inside of the windscreen was frozen, and having stuffed it full of flight cases Simon and I had to stick our heads out through the windows in order to follow Emma to our accommodation. Slightly tricky because looking for more than a few seconds was almost causing skin burn in that sub zero temperature. But, it was marginally better than closing

the windows and breathing the varnish fumes that drifted up from somewhere on the van floor

We cautiously threaded our way through this Ice Station Zebra settlement, heads bobbing out of the van, to the Polariggen, a long wooden cabin on stilts, which is run as a hostel. Emma suggested that we leave the van loaded, even though the locks were completely frozen and therefore useless! "Because crime in the settlement just simply doesn't happen."

The whole settlement seemed to be in a basin surrounded by brown and black earthy mountains and hemmed in by the freezing sea to the North.

It had a primeval feel to it. It felt elemental, like some distant planetary outpost.

Why had we come here?

Ship shape

We met up with Gina Marsh, the line producer, over some coffee. The story of the film became completely clear, but the story of the making of the film became typically complicated!

The crew had been staying aboard a Russian ice breaking cruise ship for four weeks whilst they filmed on and

around various arctic locations.

We were to join the ship when it returned to Longyearbyen on the coming Saturday. The ship would then sail at midnight on the Saturday, taking everybody to the glacier overnight ready for another early morning start!

It was now Thursday. All we could do was sit round and read Norwegian Maxpower magazines or fiddle with the wood burner. We had been strictly told not to walk around the settlement without a rifle just in case a young polar bear smells you!

In fact, the only supermarket in the settlement has an area where you can place your firearms before you get your trolley and start shopping.

Outside, down by the dock, the low bass thump of a massive twin engine helicopter, signalled the arrival of more and more under-slung loads from somewhere across the fjord. "Ah," said Gina. "How many is that now? We should have three today, two generators and a container."

Soon after that Sean Bean appeared. He was on his way back from the cruise ship to London. He looked very tired and I offered him a beer. He refused: "...No I'm alreet mate, thanks anyway."

I felt it was very important to get exercise at this temperature, and practise some ice walking in our crampons, so that we wouldn't inadvertently stab ourselves when we were on the glacier moving the weight of the camera crane. When we returned to the Polariggen we met with Brian Hall and his No 2, Paul Moores, who were heading up the mountain guide and safety team. It was really good to talk with them and let them know about our particular requirements. They were so obviously geared up for film and TV and we felt very comfortable that they were on the team.

The Polaris

On Saturday morning, the ice-breaker, the Polaris, docked at Longyearbyen. The crew piled off and painted the town. It certainly wasn't red, because we had the painter's van.

Except for a few of the Russian crew, who stared at us blankly, the ship was empty. On shore, two very tough looking Norwegian girls were winning Skidoos from the dock onto the ship's bow.

We piled our kit into what had presumably been a comfortable bar

area, now strewn with used gaffer tape, camera report sheets and various props. We found the battery charging area in what was a radio room, and carefully plugged into some spare UK sockets without disturbing any of the monster Panavision batteries.

After supper in town, we saw the Polaris bathed in sodium light from the dock. The falling snow and the plunging temperature made for a memorable scene. This was to be our home until the job was complete.

That night Polaris slipped its moorings and sailed the three hours to Svea Glacier.

We were woken with the ship's PA system set to warble. Then a message from Stalin, or somebody. After a fumble I found my watch and realised that it was the unit call for breakfast – Russian style.

The Recce

We didn't have the chance to locate the toast before the walkie-talkie traffic started and we were encouraged to standby at our muster station! Very robust looking men moved back and forth carrying rope and ice axes. The Russians and the logistics crew had the Zodiacs ready. The first landing party were asked to load and go ashore.

We then met the grip, Rupert Lloyd-Parry, who came across as a thoroughly decent sort of chap who was obviously a charming ex-public school ruffian. "You'll probably not get to the beach until late morning chaps, we don't actually need this Jimmy Jib until tomorrow, so sorry boys, but just hang out 'til then, yeah," he said as if he was in complete and overall charge of the whole operation.

There was a burst of radio traffic from the third AD on the beach to the first AD, who was obviously somewhere ashore with the DoP and the director, back to the unit manager on the hip. The situation quickly changed. Rupert found me again and said: "Uh, get dressed as quickly as you can old boy, you and I need to go with the next Zodiac to recce the Hero crevasse".

The glacier

I clipped the final pop stud on the neck of my down jacket and instantly began to steam up. I was now

dressed with thermal socks, thick boot socks, B3 boots, two thermal layers, a Mountain Equipment jacket with hood, a day sac and thick ski gloves. I struggled down the icy gangway towards the waiting Zodiac, not wanting to lose my footing amongst all those real men ... and girls!

As the boat left the safety of the mother ship and headed for the beach it was possible for the first time to get a feeling of just how desolate and weird this place was. Lumps of ice bobbed around in the ice-still lake-like sea around us. The wind created by the slipstream from the racing Zodiac instantly cut into my soft exposed face and forced my

producer, Bertrand Faivre. He seemed like a very gentle mannered Frenchman with admirable people skills. He was quite at home in this environment.

It then became obvious that we were very much the advance party. There was hardly anybody up here. The director, the DP and the A camera operator were out on the glacier with Brian Hall, working out which crevasses to use and there were three Norwegian guides who were part of the logistics crew with us at base. Except base hadn't yet been built.

The sun had by now fully risen and was in continuous sunrise mode. Everything was permanently bathed

sounds with monster bass.

The film equipment continued to pile in, but no sign of the Jib, so there was nothing for it but to lend a hand and get base camp up and running.

I fitted my crampons and, for what seemed like the next three or four hours, I worked alongside a multi national team and helped build military canvas tents, moved a mass of pallets, and set up tables and chairs outside that appeared somewhat surreal.

It was almost impossible to work with gloves on, but also madness to expose your skin to the elements and whilst trying to thread a tent together. I badly split my right thumb on an eyelet because of the cold.



The Jimmy Jib on Svea

eyes to shed painful tears. I fumbled in my day sac for my ski-goggles. Back in the limestone warmth of Cotswolds it had seemed mad to pack them. In contrast, the Russian driver simply stared bare faced towards the shore.

A monster amount of equipment and resources were pouring ashore in what seemed at first sight like an unorganised melee. A huge stack of jerry cans was supported at one end by Panaflex cases, while Skidoos angrily roared out up the glacier.

The crevasse

We arrived at base camp and I struggled off the trailer and met the

eyes to shed painful tears. I fumbled in my day sac for my ski-goggles. Back in the limestone warmth of Cotswolds it had seemed mad to pack them. In contrast, the Russian driver simply stared bare faced towards the shore.

The glacier spread out around us for a great distance and lay between two high mountain ranges; it was impossible to tell how far the hills were away from us, everything being white.

A layer of snow covered the glacier, simply clearing away the top surface with your boot revealed aquamarine blue ice, which was probably 100 metres deep. This slowly moving glacier was apparently travelling out to sea at about a metre a week. At regular intervals lumps fell off into the sea creating huge tearing

The deep red blood jetted out across the harsh white landscape. I grabbed a handful of clean frozen snow with my left hand and wrapped it around the wound to help close it, but as I pressed I noticed that my hands were filthy and the now black infected snow was crushed in amongst the wound. "Great," I thought, "I've got to operate the bloody Jib yet!"

The shot

Eventually Rupert called me over and we clumped off for a recce with the director and the other grown-ups. Guided by climber Paul Moores, we carefully traced our way around

Main picture: At the Hero crevasse, below middle: Pea Pod 500 with Arri 435 and bottom: Simon Edwards waits for the camera



several deep crevasses. Now a good distance from base, we came across a particularly awe-inspiring opening in the glacier. This was to be the Hero crevasse that the soldiers would be suspended in whilst we filmed their agony.

Roman Osin was safety roped and he leaned out over the edge looking for the camera position. He found the spot he liked and then each department agreed it was indeed a good place.

Rupert got on his radio to the ship and asked Chris the rigger to bring over a couple of 'Jonesy' decks and some scaff, and 32 'pigsears', and a whole bunch of other weird stuff, so that we could build right next to the edge of this deep crevasse.

I somehow made it back to the beach just in time to find Simon coming ashore with all our kit. There was a moment's slight panic when, as a result of a glacial

calving, a small tsunami raced up the shore nearly destroying our precious equipment.

The sight of my beloved Jimmy Jib heaped up on this frozen shore covered in snow and black sand was fairly scary,

The strong Norwegian women from the Logistics team swept forward, picking up flight cases and strapping them down on their trailers. Feeling completely inadequate I picked up a five kilo weight and carefully placed it in position on a trailer then clumsily climbed on the pillion in an effort to protect my precious and now abused camera crane. "Holding tight," said the girl. "We drive like Hell." And so we did.

Chris Belcourt had finished building his deck and the climb team had ice-screwed a rope safety line parallel to the drop so that we could clip on.

The Jib went up quickly despite the cold, and we were built ahead of the 'ready' time.

Classically the unit didn't get to us by the end of daylight and it was decided to go for the shot first thing in the morning.

We laid more ice-screws and strapped the Jib down for an Arctic night on its own with only the polar bears for company.

Dinner on board the Polaris was taken in a subdued clinking of plates and cutlery. Most people's faces were red with windburn. Everybody was exhausted, mostly by the numbing cold, and there was obvious relief that another day was over. The food and a couple of wine boxes were the big morale boost.

Apparently the catering had started off being very Russian, then a French chef had been flown out to improve the fayre.

We made the long uphill journey to base camp and then carefully walked over to the Jib position where we clipped on and started making our final rigging checks.

It was a total white out around

us. Simon and I were all alone at almost 79 degrees north on that part of exposed Svea Glacier, with nothing but the wind and my thought that a bear might suddenly rush from a crater in the snow and we had nothing to defend ourselves with but a Jimmy Jib.

At about 08:30 the B camera joined us, followed by the mass of the main. They produced an Arri 435 with a 400ft mag, a massive anamorphic zoom and, of course, Prestons for all three lens functions.

This technopile of machinery was then rudely bolted onto the Jimmy Jib, which didn't particularly like it. However hard we tried, we couldn't achieve anything like a decent centre of gravity with the camera, and as the time started to drag I made the decision to go without a proper balance. I switched the power on and the gearboxes simply took the load as if it were a young mule!

We steadily loaded the counter balance weight onto the back end until we had lift off. This is the point when everything changes, suddenly everybody takes notice, and so the show begins.

I checked that all the controls functioned and then gently lowered the camera down into the crevasse to line up the shot. The A&C head was amazing, even with all this overbalanced weight I was able to pan with ease, the tilt was noticeably struggling, but I was still in full control.

The actors were dropped in on their safety ropes hidden under their costumes. They couldn't wear crampons and so had no way of being able to kick into the ice face and support themselves; they could only dangle, all of their bodyweight forced into a sit harness.

Understandably, they immediately started to swear and complain. As a rehearsal Arwel Evans, the prop master, started throwing shovels of snow down on them. They swore even more.

Finally as their discomfort



Planning meeting

became almost intolerable we turned over, the mirror flickered the image on the monitor and I craned up and down these poor soldiers as Arwel threw down snow, and kit bags, and prop rifles that just missed the camera and bashed into the bodies of the screaming actors. It looked brilliant!

We cut the camera, and the actors were dragged out like dolls by a tug-of-war team. We hoisted

the camera up and the gate was checked. It was clean.

The director smiled broadly, thanked us for our work and said that he was happy and he would like to move on.

Suddenly it was all over. The first AD, Jack Ravenscroft, spoke to the radio mic concealed in his gloved hand: "Thank you everybody, moving on now please, thank you Simon and Simon on the Jimmy Jib well



done – by the way, that's a wrap for your good selves.... A camera, I need you ready for scene 327 by the jump location please."

Fact File

Simon Priestman is a freelance lighting cameraman and Jimmy Jib owner/operator. Simon purchased his first Jimmy Jib in 1994 and now supplies camera crane and remote head solutions to the film and TV industry as well as lighting and shooting broadcast features, commercials, and corporates. Web: www.SimonPriestman.tv email simon@simonpriestman.tv Diary: The Digital Garage Co, +44 (0)20 7348 1910.

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