

from guayaquil to ballina

What's it like to be director of photography on man's longest-ever raft trip across the Pacific? Here Gaston Collin tells us of his experience and gives us some technical hints about how to come back with the film intact. *Pacific Challenge* is scheduled to be shown on the CTV network in October.

by Gaston Collin

Saturday, March 17, 1973, a phone call introduced me to one of the greatest adventures a man could ever dream of. The Spanish navigator Vital Alsar was looking for a professional cameraman to organize the filming of an expedition he was undertaking: the crossing of the Pacific Ocean with three balsa wood rafts, each sailing independently. He was recruiting eleven other men.

A Hollywood production company, Concord Films, had already obtained the rights for the proposed documentary. Its only condition was that Vital retain the services of a director of photography.

At first, the proposition hardly seemed serious but I went along anyway, unable to resist the challenge. Besides, nothing important was being produced during this period of the year. I rapidly decided in favour of a new adventure and against being an unemployed freelance cameraman.

Within two days of my decision and after a record breaking tour of various offices to collect the necessary papers, I was off to Hollywood and then to Mexico, to meet with the expedition leader and the rest of the group.

Although not everyone was at the rendezvous in Mexico, I learned that Vital had already chosen the participants: one Mexican, one Ecuadorian, one French, two Chilians, three Americans and three Canadians. We had hardly met before we were off again to Guayaquil, Ecuador. The construction of the rafts required five to six weeks and the departure date was set for May 27. In order to benefit from the favourable winds and currents we could not leave later than that.

As soon as I had told Vital Alsar that I accepted the job he had pressed me to leave immediately. In Hollywood I met with film director and Oscar winner Robert Amram. This reassured me about the seriousness of the expedition. Production director Dan Steinbroker and I started out early the next morning to select the equipment. I had a fairly good

*After fifteen years with the Canadian Armed Forces, Gaston Collin turned to filming and has worked since 1968 on a great variety of films as cinematographer. After shooting **Pacific Challenge** he turned to Montreal to found and become president of Ciné Horizon, a production company.*



The rafts, built in the jungle, are ready for launching.



A view from one raft to the next during the journey

idea of what I wanted but time was so short that I doubted we would be able to gather the necessary equipment.

Finally we decided on the readily available Bolex SBM, with ESM motor, Crystal controlled unit, 400-foot magazine with Torque MM. The camera was equipped with a Vario-Switar POE, 16-100 MM - F 1.9, plus a 10 MM RX - F 1.6.

For the sound, a Nagra S.N. with a Crystal controlled unit was chosen with an Electrovox 635 A for microphone.

An ingenious and durable battery belt Cinetron (developed in Toronto) was to supply the power to the cameras. For the underwater shooting, we discovered a special plexi-glass housing.

The Gordon-Bell CAM-16 using the 50-foot magazine would replace the Bolex for the shooting from the top of the mast. Add a huge pile of accessories such as light-meters, connectors cables, batteries and chargers, a crash helmet for the CAM-16, a tripod, monopod and harness, multiply all the above by three and you have an idea about the difficulty of making sure that everything was there and in working order. We also brought a first batch of about 60,000 feet of commercial Ektachrome 7252 plus a few thousand feet of Ektachrome EF 7242, aluminum cases, plastic bags and foils.

The day I came aboard, Vital almost had a fit. I don't think he ever imagined what a quantity of equipment was necessary to make a film. He took his head between his

hands and shouted at me in French, "Nom de Dieu, Gaston, where are we going to put the food?" I half reassured him by saying, "Don't worry, Vital, I do not eat much." Too preoccupied by the hectic last minute preparations, Vital turned his head long enough for me to hide everything in the cabin. I felt I needed everything that I was bringing.

During our short stay in Mexico, I started looking for the two cameramen to whom I would have to teach a new trade. They would have to learn in record time. Almost immediately, I spotted Greg Holden, the Canadian and Tom Ward from Philadelphia. Both had a special sense of observation; and the way they expressed their feelings about everything we were to see and to do made me feel they probably would try to capture it on film. All I needed to do was to make them understand how to use the cameras and to teach them the intricate process of producing a picture. Both of them admitted to having already used a Kodak Instamatic. That was all.

Even though my decision was mostly intuitive and I was aware of the huge task ahead of me, I announced my choice to Vital and the director Robert, who accepted it, without hesitation.

Every day, even after long extenuating days working at the construction of the rafts, I gave Tom and Greg lectures on cinematography, inviting them to assemble and disassemble the cameras. With a lot of help from Bob Hillman, an Ame-

General Information:

Point of Departure: Guayaquil (Ecuador)

Point of Arrival: Ballina (Australia)

Duration of the Voyage: 178 days at sea

Total Distance: 9,213 miles without touching land

Breaking the Record:

This uninterrupted voyage aboard primitive rafts is hailed as the longest ever undertaken by modern men. By comparison, Thor Heyerdahl's Kon Tiki Expedition lasted 101 days and covered 4,300 miles. Vital Alsar's 1970 attempt to cross the Pacific with one raft lasted 165 days at sea and covered 8,600 miles.

The Rafts:

Constructed of balsa wood, each raft was 13 meters long and 5 meters wide. Each tree was carefully selected by the Ecuadorian Indians who guided us in the jungle. With their assistance we cut 27 trees (9 for each raft). We cut down only female trees and only during the full moon. In fact, it is proven that female trees contain more sap during this period, giving greater buoyancy to the rafts. No wire, nails or metal of any kind went into their construction. Only balsa wood, bamboo, and mangle wood were used with sisal ropes to tie the trees together.

Navigation:

While at sea, the rafts were carried by the Humboldt and Sub-Equatorial currents and the prevailing trade winds. We used a square sail and a set of boards two meters long called *guaras* to steer the rafts, since we did not have rudders. By lowering and elevating these *guaras*, which were placed between the trees, we could maintain a direction effectively, all the while preventing the sail from turning the rafts. Of course, anyone who fell overboard could not be rescued because of the impossibility of going back.

Radios:

Each raft was equipped with a transceiver to be used for making our reports every four days. Though ordinarily used for reporting the general maritime conditions, these transmitters also provided us with a link with the world and could be used in case of emergency. About two weeks after our departure two of our precious transmitters went out. They were spoiled beyond repair by sea water and the high level of humidity.

Food and Drink:

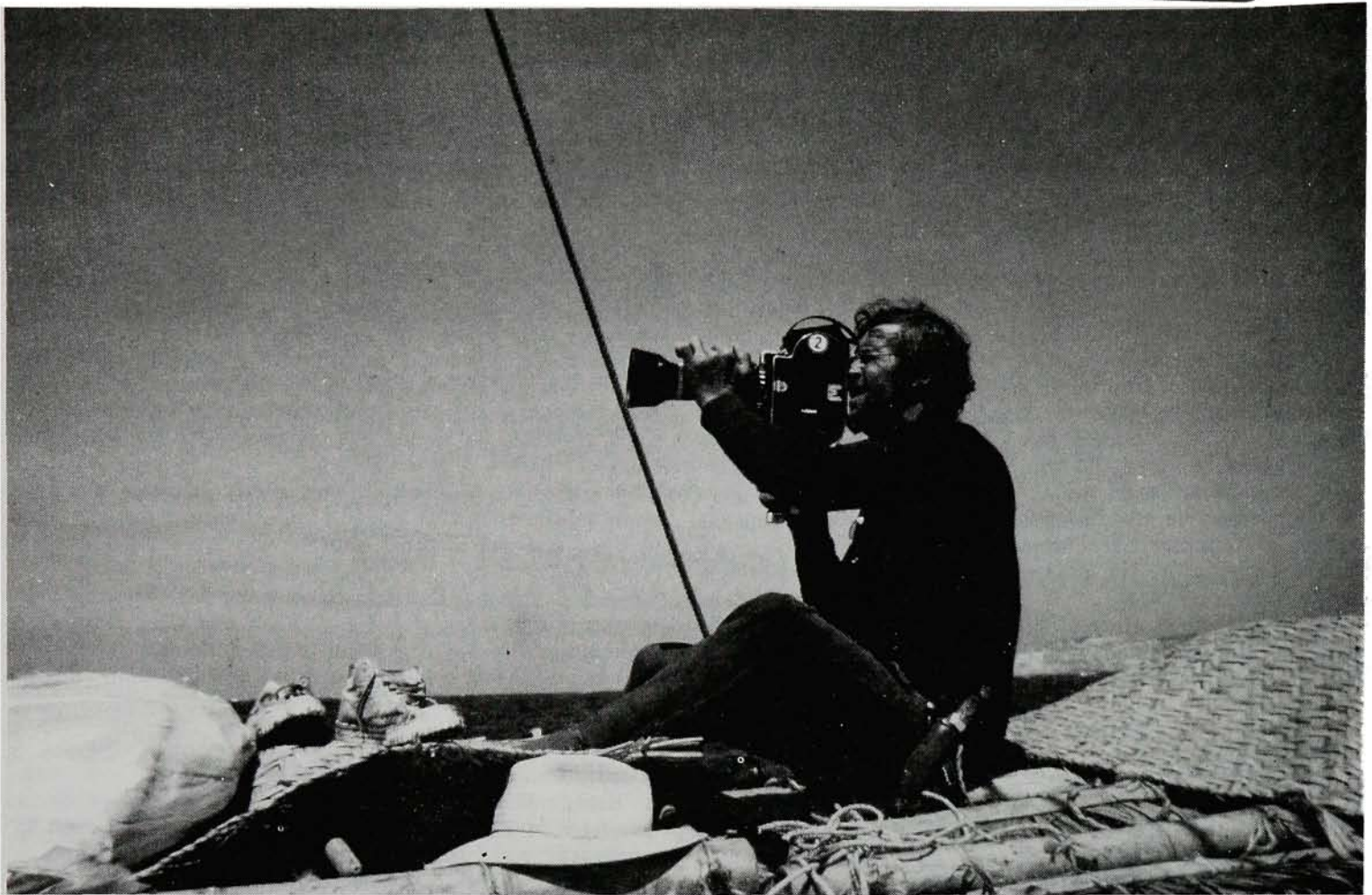
As we had reserves for only 60 days (canned meat and vegetables), it became imperative to learn to catch fish with the harpoons. Every day most of us drank from half a cup to a full cup of sea water to save on the supply of fresh water and to replace the salt lost by dehydration. The fish was cooked in sea water and a mixture of fresh water was used for the preparation of the other ingredients. The occasional rainfalls helped us keep a safe supply of fresh water.

Animals:

Three kittens, two monkeys and two parrots embarked with us. Only the three cats survived the voyage. During the crossing, we received many spectacular visitors such as a tiger-whale (the largest known fish), the great Galapagos turtles, killer-whales, and a snake-mackerel (only the third one ever seen and identified).

Scientific Conclusions:

Even if our expedition was not organized on a scientific basis, we felt that we were able to reinforce the theories which propose that large groups of South American Indians migrated toward the Polynesian Islands on balsa rafts. It is a fact that the Huancavilcas sailed their rafts up and down the coast in Pre-Columbian days. By pursuing our journey to Australia, we proved that rafts could easily survive long stays at sea.



Gaston Collin filming on the high seas

rican cameraman, we repeated the instructions and practiced doing some real shooting. Some of the film we had shot in the jungle came back from Hollywood. Although lacking real professional quality, it was well exposed. Movements and zooms had to be corrected but I was certain we could make it.

Once at sea, our first worry was to learn how to live on the rafts and with each other, and to master this type of navigation; so we left out the camera work. When I finally decided that we should be recording the events, I was shocked to learn that I had to start all over again with my instructions to my two cameramen. I could not blame them; how can you ask someone who has hardly seen the results of his work to believe in himself. On a raft, one can't compare the different conditions of shooting from day to day.

I didn't feel too confident myself, but I did not want to worry them, so we carefully planned every shooting day, particularly watching the deep shadows in the middle of the day.

The sun was terribly strong and I had to face up to Vital who did not understand why the cameras were not rolling. The first personal conflict gave me an example of what to expect; I noted that Vital and Marc, his assistant, started acting as soon as one of us took out the cameras. I could only keep my fingers crossed and hope that they would eventually ignore us and be themselves.

Vital, feeling somehow apart from the camera trio we were forming, expressed his discontent. He suspected us of conspiring not to shoot sufficient footage and threatened to give the cameras to other crew members. It would have been catastrophic for the film so I tried to talk him out of it. During a short meeting on one raft, I informed Greg and

Tom of the feelings of our expedition leader but there was no immediate reaction; no one protested. No sooner had the two cameramen returned to their respective rafts than the cameras started rolling without interruption. I was half amazed, half worried and decided not to interfere. Fortunately, and as if it had been ordered especially, a big storm forced the cameras into retreat.

Heat and humidity started ravaging our delicate equipment. Multiple repairs became urgent. Mediocre accessories had to be tossed overboard in the very first weeks at sea. They could not be repaired. The constant splashing of sea water made it obligatory to clean and to dry our equipment immediately. A full hour was necessary to even ready the camera and another hour and a half to store it after use.

Seven or eight weeks after we started, all our activities turned into a routine, requiring much less preparation in time and effort.

This fantastic adventure was recorded on 140,000 feet of film; of that, almost 68,000 feet was shot at sea. Only 500 feet were spoiled. The exposed film was preserved from the elements with the use of aluminum cases, plastic bags and foils. Although we took great care in protecting the film I feel we were extremely lucky.

Less than 4,000 feet was used in the final editing. Blown to 35mm, an 87 minute documentary will be distributed in English as **Pacific Challenge** and in a French version as **Les Radeaux**. Cine Horizon Inc. (Montreal) has acquired the rights for distribution in Canada.

Untrained in professional photography, Greg Holden and Tom Ward justified my choice by bringing back thousands of feet of highly professional stock. My only regret is that they do not continue working in the cinema industry. □