

Sweet November

By Tom Anderson

Hopefully, the SubCommittee logo will be showing up on the big screen by the end of this year in an upcoming film being produced by Warner Brothers Movie Studios. The movie "Sweet November", starring Keanu Reeves and Charlize Theron, was being filmed this past June in San Francisco. Homebase soundstage was located in one of the large buildings on the former Treasure Island Naval Base, where the television show "Nash Bridges" is also filmed. Much of the movie is filmed on locations throughout the City by the Bay, so that's why they're in San Francisco and not down south in Hollywood. In fact all three of the former Naval Bases (Treasure Island, Alameda Naval Air, and Mare Island) have buildings that have been converted into sound stages.

Late last February, the San Francisco Model Yacht Club was contacted by the set director of "Sweet November" about the possibility of utilizing the club's Spreckels Lake along with a dozen or more sailboats with their captains. The movie's storyboard also called for a model submarine to be out in the pond with the sailboats. As luck would have it for our hobby, the submarine was to run in the movie as an r/c model submarine, and not as a model standing in as a real boat as often done in other movies. The action shots would involve what submarines do best, a clandestine operation against "targets" - the sailboats. Just like in the "western movies", there are the good guys with the white sails and the bad guy (me) in the black hull submarine.

My involvement in the movie was facilitated by having an operational r/c submarine and being a member of the SFMYC. Club Commodore Ken Vaulk had included my name along with the



Tom Anderson (L) with the star of the film "Sweet November" - his Thor Flight III Los Angeles class R/C sub, *Columbia*. The dude on the right? Keanu Reeves.

sailboat skippers as being potential model boat operators for the movie. We were all operators of our transmitters off camera since all the boat captains in the movie would be children. The submarine skipper I would later work with looked more like college age though.

After several phone calls, e-mails, and a personal visit to see my subs, I was asked to come to the San Francisco Fly Casting Ponds in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park for some sea trials filming. These would later be reviewed by Pat O'Connor the director of the movie. Filming took several hours (three sets of NiCads), involved every type of maneuvering imaginable, and was filmed from several camera angles and heights. The fly casting pond also has a sink-box at one end which made it possible for the set director to film at water surface level. To say the least, it was stressful to perform on cue, but also monotonous to do so many repetitive dives, rises, and emergency blows.

Several weeks after the filming I received a phone call from the studio asking if they could come by and pick up my submarine so that it could be displayed on the set along with the other props for the movie. It was mentioned then that the studio was concerned that I had no back up submarine should there be a problem during filming. There was back up in my shop with three extra WTC's, a couple of transmitters, a dozen NiCAD's, and the good old "last resort" CA glue, but then again they would have been more



The camera barge that was used for much of the on-the-water filming of the sailboat race.

comfortable with a backup hull.

A couple of weeks go by and my hull is returned with the set director saying that the script had been changed and they were now going to use r/c model race cars. Well it was fun being interviewed anyhow. So off I went to Germany for three weeks to attend the submarine regatta (engineering competition) at Barsinghausen. The week I returned from Germany I received a phone call from the studio saying that the r/c models cars had been scratched and the sailboats and submarine were back in the script. They wanted my Thor *Los Angeles*-class submarine on the set in two days for a day of rehearsal before shooting that was to begin the following day. Talk about a two-minute warning!

The scenes that I participated in were filmed at an almost defunct, circa 1930's boatyard located in a small cove just north of the former Hunter Point Naval Shipyard. A setting that included three old tugboats lying up in the mud, a few weathered sailboats, and a wharf rat style houseboat. Why was a model submarine being filmed in this setting? Well, the story line for this segment of the movie called for a rough area of town where the local Boys' Club



Keanu (behind the light stand) cuts a deal with the "Techie Nerd" to use his sub to ensure that Reeves' girlfriend's son would win the big sailboat race. Note the SubCommittee logo on the toolbox next to the sub's propeller!

“. . .the salt water was enough to disrupt the signal so the motor would pulse on and off and the rudder acted as if it had a case of the shakes.”

would more than likely be running their model sailboats they had built. This dilapidated boatyard fits the neighborhood setting much better than the San Francisco Model Yacht Club's Spreckels Lake that was originally planned.

With the change in location we were then faced with a drastic change in water conditions, we were now running in saltwater. Panic strikes the SFMYC captains that will be controlling their boats off camera while the neighborhood Boys' Club kids act out a sailboat race with dead transmitters. None of the sailboat captains had ever run their boats in salt water before. My *Los Angeles*-class Flight III, named the USS *Columbia*, that had been selected to play the model submarine part had never been run in saltwater either. She would even be more affected by this element than the sailboats. *Columbia* would have to swallow some of this saltwater as ballast since the storyboard had her running on the surface, then into a dive below the depths of San Francisco Bay. The filming of the underwater scenes though, would later be shot in a freshwater

filming pool in Los Angeles that would be treated to look like bay water.

With a fresh tube of silicone grease, every piece of metal that could come in contact with saltwater was coated with grease applied with a fine brush. All the rubber seals were cleaned and regreased, including the Propel tank linkages. The receiver antenna was threaded up through the hull and stuffed inside the conning tower for what I thought would give her a smidgen more reception. *Columbia* was now ready for her saltwater bath and pre-shooting screening by the Warner Brothers film crew, less cameras.

There was no clean sweep for the morning rehearsal trails run. *Columbia* being all greased up for salt had not been re-ballasted for the extra buoyancy now afforded her by the saltwater. When her D & E Miniatures WTC was vented and replaced with a full belly of bay water, she only went down to where her decks were awash. In this saltwater, even with full throttle, it was impossible to dive even dynamically. The addition of almost three more ounces of lead solved the trim problem and got her diving waterline back up to the top of her sail. Fully ballasted she was now cruising the surface without a hitch. The special effects director had a diver in the water just in case, which turned out later to have been a good call.

The tide was ebbing and the water depth was getting a little thin during trials, but we had to keep going as the bay water was edging off the mud. This was not the ordinary pond mud that many of us may have experienced from time to time. San Francisco Bay Hunters Point mud consists of many decades of shipbuilding and repair, bottom paint, old zincs, welding slag, copper and brass nails and screws, and everything else that can wash down a shipway into the mud. This was more of a hazard for the divers who were now wearing heavy shoes over their wetsuits just in case. Also prior to filming the studio had the water and mud tested for chemicals, which the divers were carefully eyeballing while they suited up



Excitement mounts on the day of the big race. The sub will be launched forward of the houseboat on the right. Although this scene was filmed in late spring, the boaters' clothes creates the illusion it was in November.

earlier in the morning. Heck if it's okay for wetsuits, it should be okay for fiberglass and Lexan.

On the command of the prop director, *Columbia* proceeded from the yards' building ways into the depths of San Francisco Bay and of course with everyone watching stuck nose first in mud. A wave of the hand brought over diver assist. What a luxury to have a human *Glomar Explorer* to retrieve not a lost boat, but a boat stuck in the mud. Next trial also fell short of earning a broom for her mast. With *Columbia* sitting dead in the water, the signal was given to proceed ahead and dive to periscope depth. Both commands were executed right on cue, but a 180-degree turn to come about ended up being a zig-zag arch of missed signals. Just a simple submerged cruise at periscope depth, no more than 40 feet from the transmitter, and the saltwater was enough to disrupt the signal so that the motor would pulse on and off, and the rudder acted as if it had a case of the shakes. Out of the water and back to the dockside workbench, where the receiver antenna was now soldered to a length of 1/16-inch brass rod that would now act as a periscope and another smidgen of reception. Third time is always the charm. Out on set patrol to periscope depth - the new extended antenna never missed signal, it worked!

I should also mention some other good news for our organization. The prop director had been eyeballing a submarine hat that I had been wearing on the set and asked me if I had something like that for the actor who was going to play the part of *Columbia's* skipper. Told him I had just the item, a Subcommittee hat. Hurriedly that night I stuck on every submarine pin that I owned to make up a "nerdy" looking hat. Had to be nerdy as the local actor playing my

part was being referred to as the "Techie Nerd" in the script. My wife saw the hat stacked with all my personal things to bring to the set the next day and asked the typical question wives ask when you put on the wrong color tie, "You're not going to wear that out of the house are you?" I knew then that the hat was perfect. Well, needless to say the director and wardrobe loved it, and there is no way that our logo will end up on the cutting room floor unless they decapitate the actor! Also there should be a little "job well done" to Jim Wheeler for quickly e-mailing me a release for the use of our logo.

The first day of filming came and went without *Columbia* ever getting wet. Early that morning the director had been eyeballing the worktable I had set up for dockside maintenance and charging batteries, and had decided to also include this setting in the picture. I had hoped that this might happen so I had stuck on several Subcommittee logos the night before on each side of my toolbox. So if the close-up shots of *Columbia's* workstation are included in the movie, look at the bottom left end of the toolbox for the Subcommittee logo. But by the time the sailboats were filmed being launched from several camera angles, there was only the afternoon left for filming *Columbia*, and the tide was out which made the harbor too shallow for the filming barge to move about.

While the morning sailboat scenes were being filmed, I worked with local actor Garth Kravits, a.k.a. "Techie Nerd", on how to handle an r/c submarine for the scenes he would be doing. Now that the workstation was going to be filmed he also had to know how to look like he was charging the boat with Propel and then putting the two halves of the hull back together. He did just great,



Keanu Reeves supervises while T. Nerd launches Tom Anderson's sub. Tom operated the boat off-camera while Mr. Nerd held a dead transmitter. A bit of film trivia: The woman on the left is called a "clapper loader". She slaps the striped sticks together in front of the camera at the beginning of each scene making a visual and audio mark that is used to synchronize the film images with the audio tracks recorded on a separate tape recorder.

in fact throughout the day I watched him take the boat halves apart and explain *Columbia's* inner workings to support personnel on the set.

The workbench was filmed from five separate camera angles which maybe involved thirty-some odd takes. It was here that Keanu approached the actor who was playing the r/c submarine's "Techie Nerd" skipper, and asked if for \$100.00 he would drive his sub into the sailboat race while underwater and knock any leading sailboats off course so that his girlfriend's son could win the race. Deal accepted, the scene would next move onto the dock for *Columbia's* launching. But workbench scenes took all afternoon to shoot, so the day was over for what maybe will only two minutes of footage in the finished film. Anyway, we would have to come back for another day with more favorable tides.

A week goes by and it's now another twelve-hour day at the boatyard set with not much shade. This day was chosen because the tide was again high in mid-morning. The scenes were shot backwards to take advantage of the deeper water before the tide ebbed. As the tide withdrew all the non-diving scenes of *Columbia* would be filmed. *Columbia* with a fresh set of batteries and topped off with Propel was ready for patrol. I stood off camera while the "Techie Nerd" launched the boat with Keanu observing his every move. This scene took hours to film as it was shot from five angles. Two from the barge which took forever to set up and the other three from the dock. One of the shots also included the use of a steady cam that I had only seen used for one other shot at the

entrance of the boatyard following Keanu and Charlize.

My cue was to run ahead and immediately dive while heading for the camera crew stationed on the raft not far from the dock. Three takes and again the third was the winner. Now the same scene was filmed from three more camera angles and many more takes with the "Techie Nerd" piloting *Columbia* with a dead transmitter. In all these extra scenes the filming was cut just as *Columbia* was placed in the water.

The final scene to be shot for the day was Keanu and the Techie walking from the workbench down to the dock. Remember we were still filming backwards and have caught up (backwards) to the workbench shot that was shot two weeks before.

For what may end up being maybe ten to twelve minutes of footage in the finished film, has involved being on the set for over thirty-one hours so far. If the budget allows, there will also be a journey to the studio in Los Angeles for the underwater footage that must be shot in the special pool.

Making this movie was like being at a wedding reception. All day long people were walking on the set with food. In the morning, trays of fresh fruit and bottled water. The afternoon saw trays of deli sandwich halves, more bottled water, fruit smoothie's, and maybe a dozen types of ice cream and fruit bars. If all of that wasn't enough, you only needed to walk to the edge of the lot to the snack coach: Lox and bagels, more fruit trays, soft drinks, coffee, and espresso and mochas made to order. My first day on the set I had my choice of anything I wanted cooked to order for breakfast. For lunch I took the special (Sea Bass with a crab crust). I never even asked what else was on the menu with that as a first choice. With around two hundred people on location this was one busy place that amazingly enough ran without a flaw. **SCR**

Sweet November

Projected Release Date: November, 2000

Distributor: Warner Bros.

Production Company: Bel Air Entertainment

Cast: Charlize Theron "*Cider House Rules*", Keanu Reeves "*The Matrix*"

Director: Pat O'Connor

Screenwriter: Kurt Volker

Based upon: This movie is a remake of the 1968 movie of the same title starring Sandy Dennis and Anthony Newley.

Premise: Sara Deever (Theron) has a mission. Each month, she starts a new relationship, and helps that man become a better person, and then she moves on. Well, here comes November and this time it's Nelson Moss (Reeves), who hopes to woo her for good, but what he doesn't know is the secret behind the brevity of Sara's romances.

Editor's note: This sounds like a "chick flick" that guys won't mind going to see!