

PARADISE LOST

Making and funding an independent documentary is never easy, but shooting on a remote island is even trickier. Producer LYN COLLIE on the struggle to get 'There Once was an Island' made

Since April 2006 I've been co-producing Briar March's documentary, *There Once was an Island: Te Henua e Noho*, about a sinking island off the coast of Bougainville in Papua New Guinea. The film is a compelling story about a group of people in a remote place facing the extinction of their culture and the destruction of their homeland. These people have few resources to help themselves, and their story is a chilling insight in to what is likely to become reality for an estimated 100 million people living in low-lying coastal areas over the coming century. The film has a strong concept, a topical cause and is a worst possible case scenario for funding, scheduling, logistics, indeed everything. Getting it in the can has required relentless production work, excellent networking and a story that people are prepared to get behind.

Briar found out about the island, Takuu, from Richard Moyle, an Auckland University anthropologist who has undertaken fieldwork with the people there over the last decade and a half. Despite our independent status, he decided to support our film and help organise access to the island. But that was the easy part. Richard warned that we would be heading to a place without regular contact with the outside world – no electricity, phones, medical care or money economy. We knew that production on the island was going to be a physical challenge, that's if we managed to get Briar and a DoP there at all.

Unsurprisingly, funding was a struggle. Takuu's story has no obvious New Zealand angle and so offers little to entice the networks. Briar and I called, emailed and sent proposals, but with no luck. With established producer/director Annie Goldson on board as executive producer, we also cold-called and submitted open-call applications directly to the larger overseas documentary channels and pitched the idea to Top Shelf and Natural History New Zealand. We applied to Canon, to the DocNZ pitching forum, to the Pacific Development and Conservation Trust, the French Embassy's Fonds de Coopération Économique, Sociale et Culturelle pour le Pacifique, and some others. We discussed the project with the New Zealand Film Commission. Everyone said different things and there was much encouragement, but no one could offer financial support.

Finally, the Screen Innovation Production Fund generously gave \$25,000 and production company Robbers Dog topped up the fund to get Briar and a DoP to the island and back. TVNZ's satellite service to the Pacific also chipped in with an offer to screen the film on completion for a small fee. After eight

months of solid work, the gut-tightening reality of making a feature film on a remote island for the cost of a bad infomercial had to be faced. It was October. Production had to begin in December when Richard Moyle was undertaking his final stint of fieldwork and the boat was making one of only four annual trips to the island. This meant a huge scramble to find a DoP and equipment for free, visas and tickets, a portable way of generating electricity, some method of communication with the outside world and appropriate healthcare and insurance.

Everyone Briar and I approached to shoot the film loved the idea. No one could afford to do it. And then Zane Holmes, blessed with great connections and a respected ability to tell a story, agreed to join us. He also took on the task of sourcing all the equipment from industry heavyweights Sony and Panasonic, as well as Cinestuff and Rocket Rentals (with some help from Oxfam thrown in). We were very excited to be trialling Sony's new progressive HDV camera, the HVR-V1. With a Panasonic Toughbook, Richard's satellite phone, a data connector from Rocom and the help of boffin Chris Edwards we were able to organise a very slow Internet link. Zane also got the *Sunday Star Times* to do a story, from which almost all other print, radio and television publicity stemmed, and he sorted out the solar panels.

Our scheduling hinged on the fact that the boat to Takuu changes its departure dates almost on a daily basis. There was no control. Air tickets and insurance had to be changed more than once (made possible with the help of our long-suffering travel agent and a contact who works at Air New Guinea). The boat decided to go early so that Briar and Zane nearly missed it. There was no time to shop in Bougainville for things they needed. The visas were frighteningly late. But somehow the Gods were smiling as I shouted down the phone to the shipping company, Air New Guinea, Qantas, Adnan at Signature Travel, the New Zealand Police in Bougainville, Jim Robins at the National Research Institute, Port Moresby, the PNG High Commission in Wellington and Pace Couriers. We got the visas with seven hours to spare and portable solar panels with 30 minutes to go. The police in Bougainville shopped for us and bundled the crew unceremoniously onto the boat straight from the plane.

After the challenges of pre-production, the shoot itself proceeded under comparatively clear skies. While nothing came close to stopping production, the crew did face some serious situations like the sudden

death of one of the locals and the loss of all anchors on the boat before the journey home. There were also a variety of discomforts and irritations to overcome including clouds of mosquitoes, over-friendly mice, some unusual toilet arrangements and a backing-track of clucking chickens. However, Briar and Zane made it all look easy.

Without too much of the wrong kind of drama we've now slipped into post-production. Thanks to Paul Fairless' belief in the project, the lovely folk at Images and Sound have offered us editing facilities. With the help of editor Prisca Bouchet, this has allowed us to create a 4-minute promo, as well as to digitise our HDV footage (which looks amazing).

Given its off-shore narrative *There Once was an Island* is not the sort of film to easily attract a commission, but its human story and environmental message have made a call that everyone involved in the film, including myself, has answered. Thanks to the labour and equipment donated we've managed to get a \$250,000 film in the can for \$34,000 and change. The action behind the camera was dramatic and at times challenging, but I can honestly say it's all been made worthwhile by the action unfolding in front of it.

For more details:

www.takuufilm.blogspot.com,
www.thereoncewasanisland.com

Director Briar March (right) on Takuu island

