

A setting of bunkers and tunnels provides a bleak backdrop for a claustrophobic WW II thriller.

# Dark damp and dingy in The Bunker

Director Rob Green wanted an extremely dark, faded and gritty look for **The Bunker**, an actor-led World War II psychological thriller, so he and Director of Photography John Pardue decided to opt for the bleach bypass process. "Some of the scenes were pitch black, with torchlight bouncing back from reflective board on the bunker walls to light the actors' faces. It would be hard to find another film which has been scripted with such perpetual darkness," recalls Pardue who took on the challenge of shooting a very dark film with the increased contrast problems of bleach bypass.

The film was based on bunker systems that were newly built towards the end of the war and had not seen any military action. "Historically, some of the interior rooms would have



DP John Pardue

been painted white, but in 2002 our perception of World War II is that they should look old and dark. Not wishing to be unhistorical, but knowing that a new finish could make everything look like a set lacking authenticity, we chose to cheat reality and made our bunker look dark, damp and dingy," Pardue explains. "As the model of the bunker for exterior sequences was approximately a third of the size of the studio set, exterior camera angles were chosen with extreme care to disguise the bunker's true dimensions and match with the studio interiors." The dark palette of the lighting and production design contribute to the film's intense physical and psychological journey deep into the unfinished tunnels beneath the bunker. The darkness allowed the filmmakers to use the same tunnel areas for different scenes creating the impression that the labyrinth of tunnels extended for miles.

## Highly organised

A very tight, albeit highly organised six-week filming schedule dictated that the interior bunker scenes at Twickenham Film Studios were shot in the first two weeks, followed by a week of exteriors at Pinewood while production designer Richard Campling's construction team replaced the bunker with tunnel sets, literally completing the job as the crew returned.

"There was no chance for any pick-ups on the bunker set," Pardue recalls, "and our first day of shooting was a very dark night scene that occurred in the middle of the second reel, which meant that I couldn't build up to the very low light levels."

Exteriors form the beginning and end of

the film, with various night scenes in the middle, while the narrative begins inside the bunker and travels deeper into the tunnels as the story progresses, with many scenes cutting from bunker to tunnels. "It's an enigmatic ensemble with strong roles for the cast of nine, who play defeated men questioning what they have been fighting for."

Most of the shoot was within the sets' dark and claustrophobic confines, where Pardue rim-lit the actors just enough to define them and made the key light progressively darker to generate a sense of foreboding. "We were shooting pretty much wide open, around f2 to f2.8, but when we filmed fire and explosions we lit up to between f8 to f16 to hold the detail in the flames. We aimed to make the set come alive with



sound and create the reality of the dankness and darkness in the bunker." Pardue had to make the transition between day and night in an enclosed environment that would have naturally shown little difference between the two. "By using bounce fill from suspended 12 x 12s, we added a cold cast to the shadow areas to help the transition to night, warming up the key lights so it looks as if the soldiers are lit by practical lights. It gave us a subtle cold depth with clear detail in the shadow areas."

Pardue chose a lightweight Moviecam Compact for manoeuvrability between dolly moves and the numerous handheld shots that take the audience into the soldiers' space. "Rob wanted it very real and a bit rough, so getting in there with the actors really heightened the drama, but generally we shot the film quite traditionally using the depth of the sets as much as we could. This simplicity of shooting suited our environment as it wasn't physically possible to get a lot of equipment down the small tunnels."

## Period look

At the outset **The Bunker** has a very naturalistic period look, but as the film moves on and the soldiers' minds become psychologically affected by flashbacks and feelings of guilt or retribution and as the drama intensifies, the lighting becomes more expressionistic. A colour reversal accompanies the flashbacks as the soldiers' minds start to play tricks on them." I shot most of the film with Kodak Vision 320T 5277 film and like its soft European look; it handles the dark areas really well and is particularly good with the bleach bypass process, as its low contrast compensates for the added contrast and heavier blacks

which result from that process. The 'Varicon' system, which we used more or less throughout also helped lift the blacks and stop them becoming too dense. This kept detail in the shadows, essential for so many dark scenes. I also used an 'ultra low contrast filter no5' in a similar way."

## Flashbacks

Kodak Ektachrome 100D 5285 colour reversal film was perfect for the flashbacks that replicate home movie footage. "We cross processed the 100D, which enhanced the yellows and greens, and we tried to achieve the strong reds, warm skin tones and unpredictable colour shifts of early colour photography.

Inspiration for the title sequence of distorted skulls and close-

ups of eyes and mouths was drawn from James Wong Howe's innovative photography in John Frankenheimer's **Seconds**. Fortunately, Pardue had already used a liquid lens on a commercial and knew it would work perfectly. "It would have been easy to achieve the look in post-production, but we decided to do it in camera, rotating the distorted slides that move between the back element and focal plane of the liquid lens. It completely distorts the faces; in fact we did a few other close-ups with it in the film." The filmmakers also used a Mesmeriser, a rotating anamorphic attachment, to stretch images.

"Creating a believable concept of darkness was the hardest challenge," admits Pardue who was delighted when he saw the ACE (Adjustable Colour Enhancement) bleach bypass print for the first time at Deluxe. "John Heath did a great job and graded it in just three runs. Until then we'd only seen video rushes, so it was a really good feeling when we saw the first print and the bleach bypass and cross process reversal had really paid off with something that was visually very special; it's important for me that the visual language of the film never leaves the drama. The colour desaturation of the ACE process helped us in this." ■

## Crew List

**Director:** Rob Green  
**Producer:** Daniel Figuero  
**Director of Photography/Camera Operator:** John Pardue  
**Clapper-Loaders:** James Beeby, John Evans  
**Focus-Puller:** Nathan Mann  
**Gaffers:** Dean Kennedy, Jim Beeby

**A Millennium Pictures Production**  
**Distributed in the UK by Salvation Pictures**

Scenes from *The Bunker*.