

# THE MAKING OF THE ABYSS

Cameron's underwater epic was a shoot so torturous it not only almost sunk the director's career but turned some of the crew's hair white – literally. Take a deep breath...

WORDS: MATT MUELLER

to one journalist visiting the set — an abandoned nuclear power plant in Gaffney, South Carolina that had been given a studio makeover by its enterprising owner. The plant was never operational so the only thing radioactive there was Cameron's temper, which reared its head with ugly frequency thanks to the challenges thrown up by the two containment tanks where half the shoot took place. A filmmaker who always sets the bar so high he's not even sure he'll be able to make it over himself, his perfectionism (rude belligerence some would call it) ended up pushing many to, oh yes, the abyss.

The larger tank was 210ft wide, 55ft deep and held 7m gallons of water. On the first day of shooting, it sprang a leak and 150,000 gallons poured out. "It sounded like Niagara Falls," shudders Hurd. "We called in dam-repair experts who sealed it without us having to drain the tank." But the aquatic torment was relentless. Leaks were rampant, pipes would blow, lightning storms inflicted interminable delays — one ripping a 200ft hole in the black tarpaulin covering the man-made lagoon (used for the night scenes). Making himself more unpopular, Cameron decided it was too time-consuming to fix and switched to night shoots. When one tank was over-chlorinated, the hair of his divers turned white or burned off altogether.

But for the actors, the worst part was frustrating boredom. Michael Biehn claims they could spend whole days doing nothing.



or nearly five months on *The Abyss*, Ed Harris had endured being towed 30 feet underwater in a dive suit, up to four, five times a day. But on that particular occasion, his helmet was filled with liquid, which rushed up his nose and swelled his eyes. It was his character's ultimate dive, when oil rig foreman Bud is wearing an experimental suit filled with "breathing fluid". Unlike Bud, Harris had to hold his breath, relying on the safety divers shadowing him in the murky depths to stick an oxygen regulator in his mouth when James Cameron had what he wanted — or Harris couldn't hold it any longer. In one frightening spell, his safety diver got hung up on a cable before he could reach the gasping actor. When another diver hurried to his side, he put the regulator in upside down and Harris inhaled a mixture of air and water. "For a brief second," admits the actor, "I thought, 'This is it.'"

#### IVE BAR

Between hell and high water lies *The Abyss*... Most movie shoots pass into — the mists of time without comment, but some are so gruelling that they enter celluloid's hall of infamy, never to leave. Torpedoed by unrealistic release-date pressures, dangerous technical glitches and James Cameron at his confrontational worst, *The Abyss* was an aquatic nightmare.

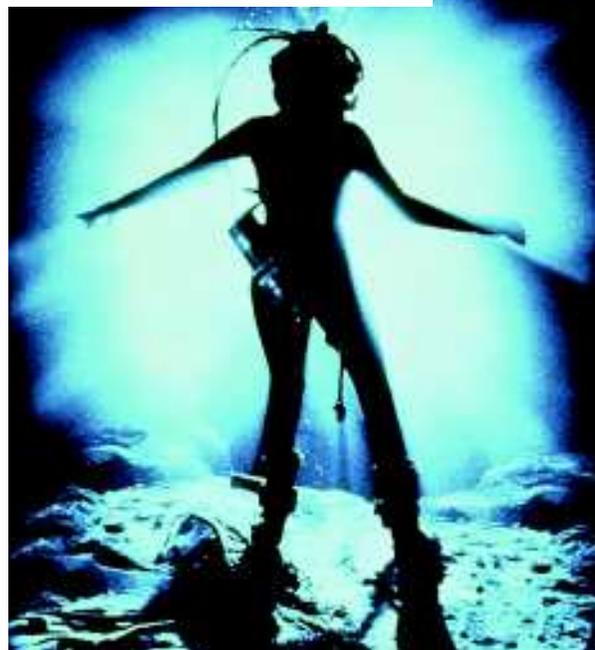
On the back of *The Terminator* and *Aliens*, Cameron was a sci-fi superstar when he pitched *The Abyss* to 20th Century Fox. His obsession with marine environments is now legend — he wanted to be a marine biologist until he found out how little they were paid — and *The Abyss* is loosely based on a short story he wrote in high school, following a science lecture where he learned animals could breathe a liquid oxygenated saline solution. The script he would eventually write contained far more than liquid lung-breathing: it was packed with a submersible oil rig, an incapacitated nuclear sub on the brink of an abyssal Caribbean trough, a hurricane, a crumbling marriage (based on his own union with producer Gale Anne Hurd) and a blue-collar crew fighting off rogue SEALs with a nuclear warhead and possibly hostile underwater aliens.

"Survival, pure survival — life imitates art in this film," Cameron described the shoot

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Michael Biehn

**Into the blue: (clockwise, from below) entering the abyss; James Cameron on set; Ed Harris and Michael Biehn face off; filming in the tank.**



“Sometimes we’d sit in a submersible for eight hours before the cameras rolled. Jim was impassioned, almost in a trance sometimes,” says the actor, whose Lt Coffey ends up suffering underwater delusions. “We never started and finished any one scene in any one day,” fumes Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio, whose character continued Cameron’s penchant for strong, resourceful women but also seemed to be an outlet for his collapsing marriage to Hurd – he made Lindsay a shrew willing to sacrifice her marriage to the noble Bud for her career.

Hurd blamed the water for the actors’ torment. Pumped in from a nearby lake, its capricious visibility required them to be poised to shoot at any moment. Sometimes it was too murky, others so clear it was invisible on camera (ground walnut shells and milk were added to mist it up). Once they were in the tank, the actors had weights attached to their ankles and waists – there was no swimming to safety if anything went wrong. During occasional blackouts, they would be struck by panic. “It was pitch black and you have no sense of direction,” recalls Biehn of one power outage. “I knew my air was good for 10, 15 minutes but everyone had a different level of air and who knew



**Sinking ship: (above) Bud (Ed Harris) and Lindsey (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio) keep their heads above water; (below) Lindsey ventures outside.**

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it seemed to go against us.  
We just never got a tail wind on  
*The Abyss* James Cameron

how long we’d be down there?” Suffering from either fright or boredom, Cameron’s actors came to wish he’d never attended that bloody science lecture.

#### THE DEEP END

“It was a bitch. It was hairy,” says Harris, underselling his grisly experience as *The Abyss*’ blue-collar hero. At first, he refused to promote the film, fuming at Cameron’s autocratic

direction and the physical torment of the shoot. Harris eventually relented, unlike co-star Mastrantonio, who went on a long, incommunicado European “vacation” during the movie’s publicity tour.

Cameron immediately defended his despotism as a reaction to the dangerous conditions, but gave short shrift to his actors’ misery. “For every hour they spent trying to figure out what magazine to read, we spent an hour at the bottom of the tank breathing compressed air,” he grimaced. The filmmaker spent 12 hours a day, six days a week, three months underwater, directing his crew

and actors via complex comms equipment and even giving notes while he was decompressing. The crew, who had to endure up to two hours breathing pure oxygen before they could get out of the water to avoid the bends, had t-shirts printed up that said, “Life’s *Abyss*... And then you dive.”

The studio suffered its own version of the bends – feeling sick at the costly shoot, they sent emissaries to stem the budgetary tide. But having relinquished creative control to Cameron, they were at his mercy – and he knew it. When one exec turned up, the



director screamed, “I want you off this fucking set now!” When the hapless Fox-man obliged, he turned to his crew and said, “Sometimes you have to make a statement.”

But Cameron’s reputation took a battering when he was late delivering the finished print, forcing Fox to miss their original release date by a month. When *The Abyss* finally came out in August 1989, its \$54m US take was deeply disappointing, with audiences and critics failing to nibble at its combined bait of stunning underwater realism and metaphysical love story. Caryn James of *The New York Times* wrote that at the end she felt like she was “getting off a demon rollercoaster that has kept racing several laps after you were ready to get off.”

A few Fox execs lost their jobs but it’s Cameron who shoulders the blame – for all the technical bravura, thrilling undersea bedlam and superb acting, *The Abyss* lacked propulsion. The notion of sweet aquatic ETs who do nothing apart from look gorgeously translucent was simply too underpowered to propel a disaster movie. In Cameron’s original cut, the aliens threatened to unleash mile-high walls of water on Earth’s coasts if humanity didn’t quit the arms race. In 1993, he restored the alien threat for a three-hour director’s cut – but its no-nukes preachiness only made it clear why he cut it in the first place.

Cameron has always declared himself proud of *The Abyss*, but even he couldn’t look back at the five-month shoot as anything other than a harrowing ordeal, referring to it as the only one of his films where he simply couldn’t catch a break. “Whenever there was luck, it seemed to go against us,” he muses. “We just never got a tail wind on *The Abyss*.” **TF**

# WHAT'S IN CAMERON'S HEAD

From deep water to deep space, here are a few of Jim's favourite things...



## WATER

"When I was a kid I used to spend all my time collecting pond water and looking at it through my microscope, trying to identify the various protozoa. I do an awful lot of scuba diving. I love to be on the ocean, under the ocean. I live next to the ocean. Possibly as a result, that has manifested itself obviously in my work."



## WOMEN

"I'd say that my father was completely unsupportive in any way, shape or form. My mother, of course, at an earlier time, was very supportive of the arts and the visual aspect of it." Interesting, then, that all Cameron's movies feature strong female characters (Sarah Connor, Ellen Ripley, Helen Tasker, Rose DeWitt, Neytiri) and a defiant theme of kick-ass feminism.



## ANIME

Cameron is a huge fan of Japanese animation. Studios often use his opinion about their anime movies on the DVD covers. His adaptation of anime actioner *Battle Angel* has been gestating longer than *Avatar* and he's recently been in Japan buying up numerous anime properties – such as the mecha-mash *Mazingers Z* – for potential future projects.



## TECH

"I was always fascinated by engineering. Maybe it was an attempt to get my father's respect or maybe it was just a genetic love of technology, but I was always trying to build things." Before he shot his first short film, Cameron dismantled his camera and spent the first half-day trying to figure out how it worked. And so it went...



## SCI-FI LIT

"At high school, I read an awful lot of science fiction and the line between reality and fantasy blurred. I tried to read a book a day. It was tonnage. Arthur C Clarke and AE van Vogt, all of the mainstream old guard. And in the latter years of high school, Harlan Ellison, Larry Niven, people like that."

WORDS: JONATHAN CROCKER