

Hardcore Action

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**A Flying Leap in
Camera Coverage**



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A Flying Leap in Camera Coverage

by Ron Magid
Photos courtesy of CrashCam Industries

Introducing characters in a memorable way is among a filmmaker's toughest jobs, and when the hero is supposed to be as daring as *XXX*'s Xander Cage (Vin Diesel), the challenge is how to deliver the goods without putting your star in jeopardy. Cage is introduced to us in a memorable scenario that might give even Paul Verhoeven or James Cameron hives: after stealing a U.S. senator's Corvette convertible, Cage has his buddies rig the car with video cameras to record its final journey and then drives it off a bridge and into a gorge, parachuting out at the last moment.

XXX director Rob Cohen wanted to make his film as true to the extreme-sports lifestyle as possible, and he was determined to capture the action in-camera. He hired world-champion basejumper Tim Rigby to take the fall. (Visual-effects supervisor Joel Hynes and his crew at Digital Domain subsequently transformed Rigby into Diesel.) Cohen also wanted to get much more coverage of the stunt than usual in order to create a multi-angle action sequence. "We used 18 cameras because we didn't want to have to do that stunt a second time," he says. "We didn't want to hear that the camera had jammed or that there was a hair in the gate. We wanted to do it once and know we had it." Cohen was especially eager to have footage of the crash from the perspective of the cameras that Cage's accomplices strap onto the car, but it seemed there was no video camera on earth that could survive the 718' drop with its footage intact.

Enter CrashCam Industries, a rental house that designs crash housings used to shoot extreme action sequences. CrashCam co-owners Ed Gutentag and Michael Kelem have helped cinematographers capture hair-raising shots for stunt sequences in films such as *Gone in 60 Seconds*, *Minority Report* and *Spider-Man*. Typically outfitted with an Arri 35-3, Arri 2-C or Eyemo, the CrashCam system is designed to survive almost anything a filmmaker has in mind.

"To get what Rob Cohen wanted in *XXX*, we essentially had to take the impact of the crash away from the video recorder," Gutentag says. "The most important thing to protect was that little MiniDV tape, and my idea was to put Sony XC999 lipstick cameras in the videocam housings. I figured the audience would never know we had replaced the cameras, and we could run cables back to recorders in crashproof 'black boxes' in the trunk."

Cohen and director of photography Dean Semler, ASC, ACS were enthusiastic

about Gutentag's idea. "Dean said, 'It's like putting something on eggshells – the eggshells will break but not the recorders,'" Gutentag recalls. Cohen asked CrashCam to design the camera housings to look as though they'd been built by Xander and his crew. "Rob said, 'Think garage – all you have is a hammer and a screwdriver,'" Gutentag says.

"We cut 10-inch round aluminum tubing into 10-inch pieces, and my machinist milled the back and front lids," he details. "We made a cool cutout for the lens and another cutout on top so the cameras could theoretically be turned on by remote control. We added different-colored motocross handles we got from a local mountain-bike shop, and then the prop department dirtied them up."

Altogether, CrashCam built 15 housings. Per Semler's instructions, each car was fitted with three: one mounted on the hood facing Diesel or his stunt double, another mounted on the side passenger door and the third mounted on the floor of the passenger seat. Five sets of housings were required: two for the first unit, which shot everything up to the car hitting the bridge, and three sets for the second unit.

To create multiple layers of protection for the cigar-sized Sony cameras (which were PAL models), Gutentag first "cut a bolt of foam a little bigger than each housing, then cut a hole in the middle of it and put the camera dead center in the foam. Each camera had a 3mm lens, which is equivalent to 10mm in the 35mm film world. A battery in the trunk powered the decks and the cameras, and I drilled holes throughout the car to hide the video and power cables. I then put the recorder decks into MiniDV clamshell boxes, which I then installed within waterproof, crushproof, Pelican plastic cases."

Gutentag got an idea for additional protection from an unlikely source: "I'd just finished reading an autobiography by [recently retired General Electric CEO] Jack Welch. He had worked in G.E.'s plastics division, and he discusses silicone in his book; that led me to go on the Web, where I found different silicones that Boeing had used to buffer turbulence. I bought one that I thought would absorb some of the impact, and I poured and baked two cake pans of it in [special-effects supervisor] John Frazier's shop. I put a 2-inch-thick layer of silicone in the bottom of a bigger Pelican case, placed my Pelican with the recording decks on top of that, and then laid the other cake pan of silicone over the case. Then we lined the trunk with bubble wrap to create an air cushion for the Pelican cases."

When the filming of the stunt was finished, the production discovered that even the cameras' lenses had survived. The footage was a smashing success. "Those three cameras gave us a perspective that we couldn't have got with greenscreen or anything else," Cohen enthuses. "We could never have predicted the way Tim would lift off from the Corvette before he pulled the drag chute. Something about terminal velocity made him float away from the car like an astronaut in freefall. The images are amazing."

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