

# My Studio is a Tropical Rainforest ... Get me out of here!

by Andy Ciddor

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In August 2002, UK media giant, Granada plc, chose an Australian rainforest at Tully in northern Queensland, as the setting for their wildly successful reality TV production; "I'm a Celebrity ... Get Me Out Of Here!" When it came to producing a series of "I'm a Celebrity..." for America's ABC network, followed a few weeks later by a second series for its home UK market, Granada went about setting up a rainforest production facility that would service both of these productions, with the potential for others in the future.



Granada has taken a one-plus year license over a privately-owned area of rainforest near Murwillumbah in northern New South Wales. In late November 2002, work began on constructing the access roads for what would temporarily be, one of the largest television production facilities in Australia. With 42 cameras, 13 Avid edit suites, and a staff of around 390, operating on a round-the-clock basis for the duration of each series, the facility was certainly one of the busiest in the country.

Lighting Director on the two productions scheduled for the Granada facility, was Sydney-based David (Dizzy) Scandol. Originally hired to assist UK lighting designer Tom Kinnane on the first series of "I'm a Celebrity...", Scandol was brought in for his knowledge of infrared lighting techniques; acquired as LD on Australia's "Big Brother" series. When Kinnane was unable to get to Australia for the next two series of "I'm a Celebrity...", Scandol was approached. "It's great to be working on these productions," says Scandol. "It's quite rare for an Australian LD to be given the opportunity to light productions for both US and UK prime-time television".

One of the primary concerns for Scandol was to meet the requirement from the producers, that the pictures have a gritty, live documentary look, to emphasize the immediacy of the dangers involved for the contestants. One serious planning constraint was that once the contestants were in residence in the "Jungle Camp" set, there was essentially no crew access possible for adjustments or regular maintenance during the two weeks the production was continuously on air. This necessitated contingency plans for the coverage of a wide range of possible shooting areas and camera angles. Scandol also had senior technician Robbie Burr and the crew prepare stand-by replacement luminaires for the camp area, as on-set repairs were not practicable.

The main apparent light sources in the camp area were 20 practical "Tilley lamps" (equivalent to the Coleman lamp for those in the Americas). These were re-engineered by Fleet Lighting to use a 500w CP82 (T/18 / FRH) and a reflector, instead of the original pressurized kerosene source, and did provide a substantial proportion of the light in the camp area.

In the first series, only ten, 200w Tilley lamps were used, requiring the cameras to operate at wide-open aperture, with 12dB of gain added, to achieve a working exposure. The use of more, and brighter practicals in the later series, enabled camera gain to be reduced to +9db, despite the camp area being approximately four times larger. Exterior weatherproof parcans, custom colored in jungle green, provided additional light over the camp area until lights-out.

Once the contestants were left in "darkness", a half-dozen infrared floodlights were employed to supplement the infrared LEDs on the heads of the 13 Sony CVX-V18NS night shot cameras, to enable full coverage of after-dark activities in the camp area. TechArt dimmers, selected especially for their low acoustic noise, controlled all fittings in the campsite area.

In addition to the camp site and the Challenge Area, where each day the contestants underwent all manner of bizarre "Bush Tucker Trials" (the producer's euphemism for tortures) for the amusement of the viewers, there was a 10m x 10m (33ft x 33ft) roofed "Studio", situated some 8m (25ft) up in the trees.

This open-sided studio, with a 270 degree panorama of rainforest behind it, had a full truss lighting grid, populated by the very serious amount of lighting gear required to work against the strong Australian tropical sunlight. The rig consisted of 12 x daylight corrected 12kw UltraLight Dinettes (Dutch Dinosaurs), 16 x DeSisti 2.5/4kw HMI Pars with DMX controlled ballasts, 2 x 1.2kw DeSisti HMI Pars with DMX controlled ballasts, and a further 8 assorted 1.2kw HMI Pars.

Having the dimmable tungsten Dinettes, together with a majority of controllable HMI heads, allowed Scandol to balance his pictures from the main control facility some 700m(2,300ft) away, as the daylight varied with changes in the weather and the time of day. At all times three of the ten lighting crew were involved with production activities. One looked after HMI's, another watched the weather and acted as the LD's eyes on the set, while the third, equipped with a 200w HMI sungun, was charged with watching the action and responding to the production's needs before they arose.



Beneath the floor of the studio, was an equipment storage level, which served to keep much of the equipment out of the tropical rain and the mud, providing a dry home for the HMI ballasts and the studio's 72 channels of dimmers. Indeed, weather conditions were extremely important. When the preliminary site work was being carried out, great care was exercised to prevent any fires being caused by work in the then, tinder-dry bush on the site. However, by the time the US season went to air two months later, the worries were more about being washed away.

Murwillumbah is the wettest place in New South Wales, with an average February rainfall of 227mm(9in). However, during the three weeks of rehearsal and shooting for the US series, the district received 550mm (21.6in). Earth leakage protection, in the form of Residual Current Detectors (the equivalent of Ground Fault Circuit Interrupters) was of course, absolutely essential. Surprisingly enough, despite all of the rain on a site using around 1.3MVA of power, there were only a couple of minor circuit interruptions due to rain getting into the practical Tilley lamps.

Fleet Lighting supplied the Dinettes, Tilley lamps, and some 1.2kw HMI pars. All rigging and grip equipment and the balance of the lighting systems, was supplied, customized and maintained by Schuster's Lighting Supplies. Power for every requirement, including lighting, technical, safety and accommodation was generated, and reticulated right up to the power socket or the dimmer rack, by Aggreko Event Services. With this facility now operating only one hour's drive from some of Australia's most popular beach resorts, the opportunity to establish a semi-permanent tropical rainforest backlot must surely be very appealing to the world's legions of reality television producers.