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Cinefex Vault #14 – Troy

by **Joe Fordham**

Posted on **September 5, 2018** by **Joe Fordham**



This little story, originally published as a Cinefex Weekly Update newsletter feature in May 2004, was one of a few little satellite pieces that came adrift from our larger magazine stories. In this case, our story Bronze Age Ballistics in Cinefex 98 – which covered the making of Wolfgang Petersen’s Hellenic epic Troy – was simply too chockablock with rampaging armies, crashing weaponry and collapsing cities to accommodate a fascinating aspect of the film. While on my interview trail, I had been astonished to hear about the creation of the full-scale Ancient Grecian battleships, built by marine coordinator Mike Turk and his nearly-300-year-old family business in London. So, rather than paraphrase Mike’s remarkable stories into a passing paragraph, I saved his story for this fascinating capsule, which we are pleased to undock here from the Cinefex Vault.

Cruel Sea – article by Joe Fordham

3,197 years ago, a beautiful woman absconded with a youthful prince from a neighboring city and inspired her jealous husband to mount a mission to retrieve her, gathering a fleet that – legend has it – numbered 1,000 ships. Now the subject of Warner Bros.’ *Troy* – adapted from classical texts by screenwriter David Benioff and directed by Wolfgang Petersen – the story exploded onto theater screens with a stellar cast, vast scenes of war and some of the largest sets ever constructed on a feature film location.

Assisted by physical effects, makeup effects and visual effects from four London effects studios, production designer Nigel Phelps resurrected the ancient city of Troy and launched the Greek attack almost entirely on location in Malta and Mexico. “Wolfgang wanted to make the film look as real as possible,” stated visual effects supervisor Nick Davis. “He wanted to show the sheer scale of battles and the massive Greek armada, but he wanted the camera right in there with his stars, really on the ocean.”



— One of two full-scale warships built for Warner Bros. Pictures' 2004 historical drama, *Troy*. Shipbuilders R.J. Turk and Sons, led by marine coordinator Mike Turk, built the seaworthy vessels from designs based on historical reference.

Art director Cliff Robertson initiated warship design by drafting conceptual renderings for two full-scale seaworthy vessels, extrapolated from historical reference. "Both ships were 'monoreme' designs," related marine coordinator Mike Turk. "Unlike a bireme or a trireme, which had two and three decks of oars, monoremes had a single bank. It was the oldest and simplest style of vessel, which helped keep labor costs down for rowing; but they had to look enormous, very high-sided and menacing."



Turk's family business, R.J. Turk and Sons – based in Kingston upon Thames, near London – has been building ships since 1710, during the reign of Queen Anne, and has supplied boats and ships for film and television dating back to MGM's *A Yank At Oxford* in 1938. Turk drew upon his maritime lineage for *Troy*, referencing the 1987 reconstruction of *Olympias* – an Athenian Trireme of the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. – led by John Morrison, former President of Wolfson College, Cambridge. "I knew Professor Morrison," said Turk, "but we only used his research on the oars. In fact, because we were working from Cliff's drawings, we worked backwards, figuring out what lengths our oars needed to be to reach the water – doing everything arse-about-face!"



Turk's naval architect, John Heath, devised working drawings from the designs. An oar specialist then built 19-foot-long oars out of spruce, and Turk's team built masts and spars at his boatyard in Kingston. The main structural build took place at Cassar Dockyard, close to the main filming location in Malta, where steel fabricator Norrie Henderson lead construction of the hulls – one measuring 120 feet, the other 140 feet. "We didn't try to build

the hulls traditionally in timber," Turk said, "because we only had four months to build them." Steel hulls helped the ships comply with maritime safety standards. "We built them to the same standards as passenger ships that cross the English Channel. They had no cabins or sleeping accommodations and, in fact, no toilets; but otherwise they complied to day-sailing regulations for 100 people."

The art department devised six liveries for the ships depicting different ornagements for tribes of the allied Greek forces. Turk's team created sails using flax, an authentic material to the period, and designed custom rigging. "We had no historical detail whatsoever about rigging," Turk explained, "so we used our best means of guessing. But they sailed all right, so we guessed correctly!" Sailing was accomplished with combinations of oars and wind power, assisted by a pair of diesel engines mounted aft, beneath the waterline, in line with twin rudders. Helmsmen used engines to position warships in shots and bring the 70-ton vessels up to



speed.

Bringing manpower up to speed proved a bigger hurdle. "We only had six days of training," related Turk. "I brought out six Watermen from England, who were expert rowers – tug skippers and passenger boat masters from the London River, and winners of Doggetts, the oldest rowing race in the world – and they trained our local oarsmen, who were made up of waiters, out-of-work cooks, chefs and other colorful characters." Despite the ragtag crew, warships performed impressive feats of seamanship. "For one shot, they wanted the camera to hang out over the water, shooting under the bow, then rising up and descending over the stern. We did that on the Mall, outside Valletta harbor, running the ship by the camera within five feet of the sea wall, with ocean liners and ships sailing by as we came out. We got up to about 14 knots – that was bloody fast."



Warships roamed up and down the Maltese coast, shooting ten days of first unit with principal performers, and three weeks with second unit, accompanied by an armada of 25 ancillary ships coordinated by Turk. Support ships doubled as camera craft, two passenger ferries served as lunch and toilet facilities, while a flotilla of safety boats, police and security trafficked the area. Turk's team also constructed a half-boat launch to represent Spartan King Agamemnon's barge and smaller

period vessels similar to Arab fishing boats.

At the end of the Malta shoot, warships were dry-docked, then the art department recycled sails, masts and rigging in Mexico, constructing beached versions of the ships using molds taken from the hulls. With digital enhancement by Framestore, and building on years of maritime history, the ships provided dramatic underpinning to an epic adventure. "A Turk built a warship in defense of the realm to the south of the Tower of London in 1295," Turk remarked, "so we have been building warships for some time! It was quite dramatic stuff. I hope it comes across on film."



For the complete story on the effects of Troy – featuring interviews with Nick Davis, The MPC, Framestore, physical effects supervisor Joss Williams, makeup effects supervisor Daniel Parker and more – look for [Cinefex 98](#).

Photos copyright © 2004 by Warner Bros., behind the scenes reference shots courtesy Framestore.

2 THOUGHTS ON "CINEFEX VAULT #14 – TROY"



Ian Robson (Wally Veevers Special Effects Group)
on [September 7, 2018 at 6:04 am](#) said:

Turks built for me also on Mr. Billy Wilders 'The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes', wooden masts & spars for the 'Tanallion Castle' scale model liner to my drawings. Which was the biggest ocean going model in the world (filmed in the English Channel), until Mr.Cameron built his Titanic model in Mexico. But Cinefex I'm afraid 'Tanallion Castle' ,sadly she ended on the cutting room floor at Pinewood. Nine months solid bash prop work with brass portholes real teak decks etc., So no cinema proof to show the girlfriend of the time or the family.... That's Show Business! I have photos in my archive should I be questioned....



Joe Fordham

on **September 12, 2018 at 9:32 am** said:

Thanks, Ian. Sounds fascinating. We'd be happy to feature the Tanallion in a Cinefex Blog, if you'd care to drop us a line: [joefordham \(at\) cinefex dot com](mailto:joefordham@cinefex.com).

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