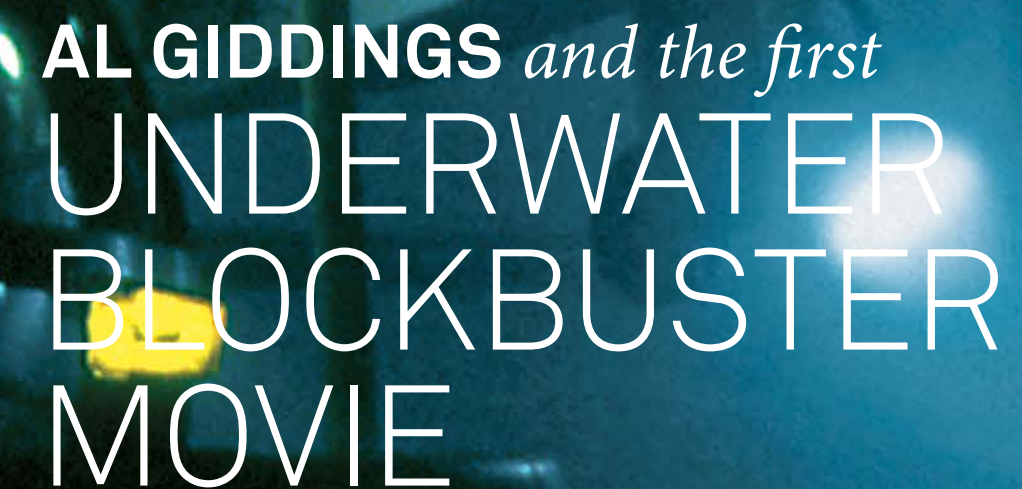


2012  
2013

# AL GIDDINGS *and the first* UNDERWATER BLOCKBUSTER MOVIE



### AL GIDDINGS AND THE FIRST UNDERWATER BLOCKBUSTER MOVIE

*Most of the early underwater films were documentaries or minor parts of movies that were not really shot underwater. It took one hell of a diver and a brilliant cameraman to reinvent the process and create the most ambitious underwater motion picture ever made at that time. It instantaneously became a blockbuster release. Al Giddings was the man, and he started a legacy of marine-themed movies with Hollywood’s top directors.*

“The moray shot out, needle-sharp teeth dug deep into the neck of the man whose throat twitched uncontrollably as he was dragged to the tiny dark hole in the wreck. Blood oozed out of the sides of the moray eel’s mouth. The man opened his lips, lost the mouthpiece, and screamed in agony.”

Anybody who has seen the film *The Deep* will remember that grizzly scene where the giant moray eel kills the villain and saves the hero in the process. But nobody could imagine how difficult it had been to get this final, and best known, underwater action scene finished after five months on a submerged set, about five meters underwater, with a mechanical eel and an intoxicated actor—on this late afternoon in November 1976.

Shooting *The Deep* was a monumental undertaking. It was the first major Hollywood movie to have significant portions of actual underwater footage shot in the ocean, not

some rudimentary aquarium sets that looked artificial and fake. The 1954 version of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (starring Kirk Douglas, Peter Lorre, and James Mason) really broke the mold, but less than five percent of the film featured underwater sequences. The next film to up the ante was 1965’s *Thunderball*, which had Sean Connery as James Bond in a number of underwater segments in submerged Bahamas caves, aircraft wrecks with live tiger sharks, and the exciting conclusion of an underwater battle that ran nearly 20 minutes and was filled with action-packed underwater heroics. But Giddings was going where no one had gone before: *The Deep* was a giant step forward where more than half of the entire movie was shot underwater! In the beginning Columbia Pictures didn’t even think it was possible. Giddings had to invent the camera systems, locate a suitable, full-size real shipwreck for the ocean wide-angle

#### AL GIDDINGS

During the last four and a half decades, Al Giddings has earned a reputation as one of the most creative and talented filmmakers in the entertainment industry. His diversified roles have included that of director, producer, and cinematographer. Never settling for off-the-shelf technology, Giddings is constantly designing new cameras, lighting and optical systems in all film and video formats, from IMAX to High Definition TV. Al Giddings is well known for his underwater directing and shooting of such highly acclaimed films as *The Deep*, and the movies in the James Bond series

such as *For Your Eyes Only* and *Never Say Never Again*. But what many don’t know is that out of necessity for his film projects Giddings was also a pioneer in technical diving. Al was the first to dive with mixed gases on the *Andrea Doria* in 1969, the first to discover, dive and penetrate the Japanese *I-169* submarine in Truk Lagoon in 1973 and he’s been incorporating innovative gear, such as rebreathers, in his projects for years. Giddings also pushed underwater techniques and technology for *The Abyss*, and the film went on to

capture an Academy Award nomination for Outstanding Cinematography. More recently, he served as coproducer and director of underwater photography on James Cameron’s spectacular *Titanic*, released in 1997. The film, of course, broke all box office records in film industry history as well as dominating the 1998 Academy Awards including the Oscar for Best Picture. Giddings has directed and filmed dozens of works for television, including his specials on the *Andrea Doria*, as well as films on the North Pole, deep-sea volcanoes, great whales and sharks.

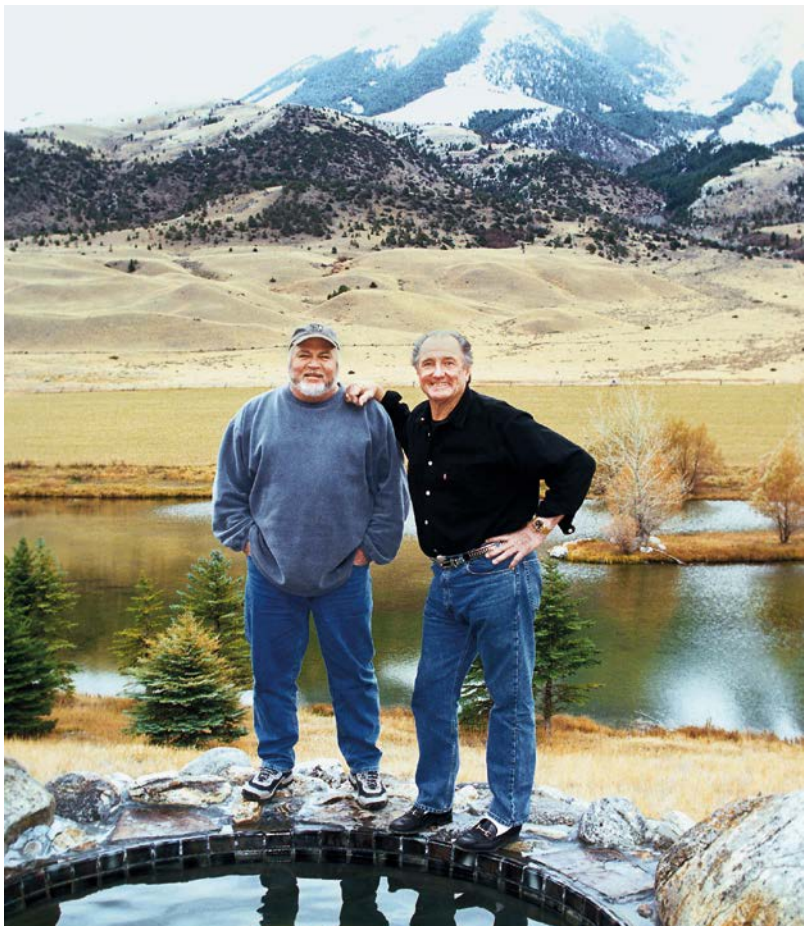
In 1996 Giddings did *Galapagos: Beyond Darwin* for the Discovery Channel, one of the highest rated shows in its ten-year history. Three television specials, *Blue Whale*, *Shark Chronicles*, and *Mysteries of the Sea* each earned him Emmys. Al Giddings also produced and directed *Ocean Quest*, a five-part NBC ocean adventure series that captured the number one slot in prime-time ratings. No one in diving history has come close to his record in such a variety of underwater filming.



*“I got hired by the studio to be the underwater director for ‘The Deep.’ My approach was to shoot it underwater as a creative topside director of photography would: with different focal lenses, three cameras shooting simultaneously, and give the editor something really dramatic to cut. I had no idea that my vision would test the limits of technology and that most everyone else thought that I was crazy.”*

*Al Giddings*





1976

**LANDLUBBERS.** Bret Gilliam and Al Giddings at his Montana house during interview.

exterior shots, and train real actors to perform underwater as divers. Because the movie was set in Bermuda, Giddings had to construct a saltwater replica set on location, which recreated the real wreck, so lengthy underwater segments could be filmed without depth restrictions and absurdly long decompressions. But Giddings was a visionary who managed to pull it off against seemingly impossible obstacles.

He began in the mid-1950s. “I got excited about diving and, I thought, somehow I’m going to make my living in the diving world. Probably two years into it, I became more interested in shooting with a camera. Now I could see the possibility of earning my keep diving, but photography, that would really be the way to go. So I started building camera housings on the side. I was already doing stills, I could buy 20 dollars’ worth of Plexiglas and a bunch of surplus store fixtures and build an underwater movie camera housing fashioned after Jordan Klein’s, who was building them at the time.”

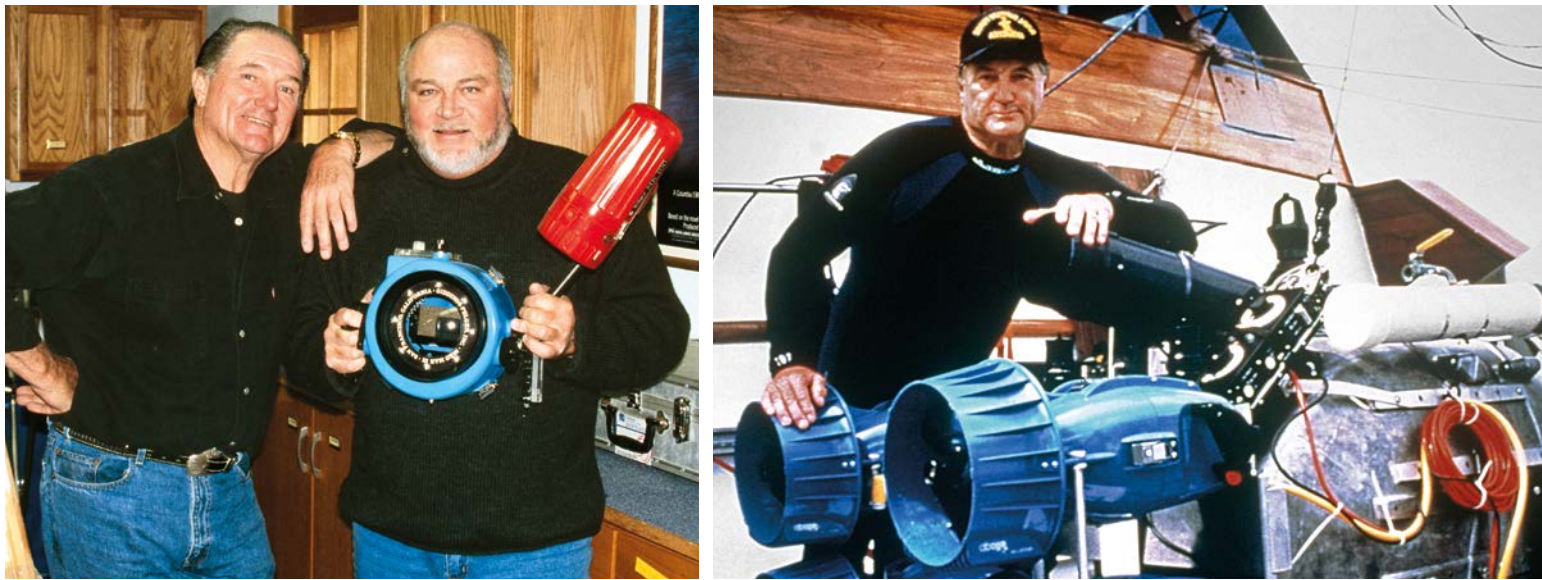
Although Giddings had an interest in a dive store in San Francisco, he later branched into another company, with partner Mike Felgen, that built specialized underwater camera systems. His Giddings-Felgen products were unequaled at the time for their quality and efficiency. “I was one of his earliest distributors in the Caribbean in 1971 and still have my first NikoMar housing and Seastar III strobe. Over 40 years later, they still work great and have become valued collectors’ items.” This company’s success fueled his passion to make commercial films that could become a viable career.

“I started getting involved with *National Geographic*. Then I ventured into motion picture film. Al Tillman had the first big underwater festival in Southern California, so I started selling some of that material. I did films with AMF

Voit and U.S. Divers: *Painted Reefs of Honduras* and *Twilight Reef in Cozumel*. There was just enough work to sort of pay the rent and ten years later an event happened that really accelerated things.”

Giddings was about to get his first break into Hollywood. “Cornel Wilde (the actor) approached me and had this feature called *Shark’s Treasure*... a real Hollywood pot-boiler. I think his budget was about 1.8 million dollars. So we shot on 16-millimeter and blew it up to 35-millimeter. I went to Australia, set up cages, and strategically baited the sharks. I had really great results, and although it was a low-end B-picture, a lot of people saw it... the shark material specifically... and thought it was pretty exciting. Columbia called me a few years later and they brought up *Shark’s Treasure* and I initially backed off... a bit embarrassed. But they said, ‘Why are you backing off? The picture did 11 million dollars gross, but cost only 1.5 million dollars!’ At the time that was real money and they loved the images, so I partnered with Stan Waterman to shoot *The Deep*.”

Columbia brought in a rookie producer named Peter Guber who had gained credibility in an associate role working on *The Man Who Would Be King* with Sean Connery and Michael Caine, a film that did well at the box office. The studio believed in Guber and he talked industry veteran Pete Yates into being the director after his great successes in numerous films such as *The Eagle Has Landed* with Michael Caine and Donald Southerland, *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* with Robert Mitchum, *Murphy’s War* with Peter O’Toole, and *Bullitt* with Steve McQueen and a beautiful young new actress named Jackie Bisset who had a small part as McQueen’s girlfriend. The studio had enjoyed phenomenal profits the previous year with *Jaws* and took the option on



Peter Benchley’s next book (*The Deep*) before it had even been released and brought him as screenwriter for the movie version. Columbia gave the team an 8.6 million dollar budget and the project was started.

Guber put up a good front, but he confided, “Making Benchley’s second book into a film was one frightening plunge after another for me. No only had I never dived before, I’d never produced a motion picture myself. And learning to produce by making a complicated movie like *The Deep* was kind of like learning to fly by first taking up a Boeing 747 passenger jet! Suddenly I felt like a baby bird who’s restless to try his wings, but freezes with fear when tossed out of the nest.”

In addition to the technology challenges, this was the first time a film set out to use real actors playing their roles underwater. An exhaustive search finally resulted in recruiting Robert Shaw, Jackie Bisset, Nick Nolte, and Louis Gossett as the stars. One problem, however, still loomed: none of them were divers. The studio guys talked constantly about using doubles, but Giddings was adamant about the need for the real actors so he could shoot close-ups and all elements of a scene underwater without restrictions. So he was determined to talk them into learning to dive. It was a struggle.

When first approached, Bisset said to Giddings, “I want to get something straight at the beginning of this conversation, not only am I not going to dive, but I don’t even like to put my face in the water.” But by time they arrived on location in the British Virgin Islands on July 4, 1976, they had all agreed to try scuba training. “I was involved with the film since I had a diving operation there and was contracted to supply equipment, a boat, tanks, and solve some logistical

issues in advance with the BVI government. My friend Murray Maxwell got the job of training the actors and producer Peter Guber. Some took to it quickly, but others had more problems. Finally, after several weeks Bisset was ready to do her own underwater scenes on the wreck of the *Rhone*, a 380-foot sailing vessel that had sunk in a hurricane in 1867. It was now a local, popular dive site with the bow section at nearly 90 feet and a massive interior perfect for the spooky confined compartment scenes called for by the script.”

Guber summarizes his own emotions about learning to dive. “As I listened to Murray’s instructions about not panicking if I ran out of air on my first dive, I thought: ‘Who the hell is he kidding?’ Now I’m ready to jump into the ocean and it’s almost impossible to hide my panic and anxiety. Enclosed in the clammy rubber of the wet suit, with unfamiliar equipment on my back, the harness and tank seemed to weigh a ton. I felt like a newborn kitten being licked by a Great Dane as I slipped underwater. Panic? I was beyond panic. I had one clear lucid thought as I descended: What in hell am I doing here?”

Of course, Bisset’s infamous wet T-shirt scene in the film’s opening segment went down in history and boosted her to instant major stardom. Nolte was athletic and picked up diving quickly as did Gossett. But Robert Shaw had some different issues for Giddings to deal with.

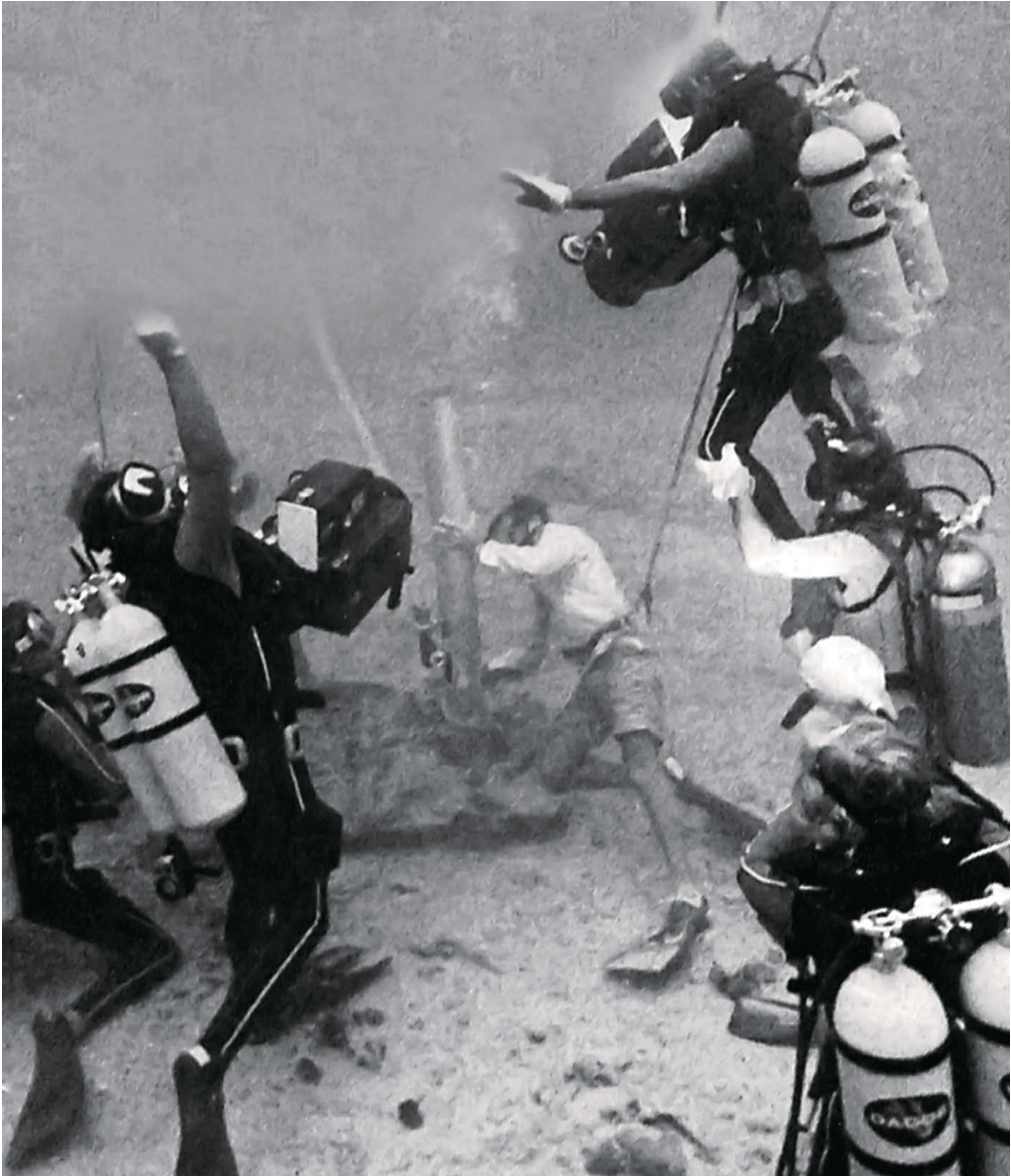
He remembers with mixed emotions, “Shaw was a great man and a wonderful artist, but he did have a bit of a drinking problem, as you’ll remember. On the last hours of the last day of *The Deep*, he was too drunk to do his final scene. I know you remember where the giant eel grabs Lou Gossett by the head and drags him back into the wreck.

**SMALL STUFF.** Al Giddings and Bret Gilliam holding an original NikoMar camera housing by Giddings-Felgen.

**BIG BROTHER.** Al Giddings with IMAX 3D camera system in Galápagos Islands.  
Photos: Al Giddings (private) (2)

1976





Shaw's character is also tied up in the line from a spear gun and is being dragged toward the eel's hole. Well, Shaw showed up to the set pretty bombed, actually more than bombed." In fact, Peter Yates took one look at him and said, "Forget it, no way!" Shaw came over, took Giddings aside and said, "Al, I know you can get me through this." Al went back to Yates and said, "It's going to be okay; we're going to do it." He got cameraman Chuck Nicklin and the rest of the crew in the water and lit the set. They couldn't believe it after watching Shaw stagger around. But in they went. Shaw somehow made it to the edge of the platform. Al got in facing him, grabbed him by the tank straps, and hauled him into the water. He had to put the regulator into his mouth for him. "All the while I'm looking into his eyeballs trying to read him. He just smiled; he was feeling no pain. So down we went to the underwater set, the lights came on, the cameras were ready; I jammed him into position and then wrapped the line around him to set the scene. He was so out of it, he kept spitting out his regulator too soon since he thought we were rolling and I'd keep jamming it back in his mouth and he'd just grin at me." Finally, Giddings had him in position, all tied up and ready for the eel to drag him away. With the camera in one hand, Giddings had to hold Shaw still, and focused on his face. "I nodded and he came alive and started acting. He spit out the regulator and I'm shaking him for effect with one arm, and he's fighting back looking pretty heroic for a guy who could barely walk, much less swim. We did about five takes; then I handed the camera back to Nicklin and swam Shaw back to the surface. I had to lift him out of the water he was so gone." Then he put his arms around Al and said, "We got her, boy!" Meanwhile Yates, the director, is in the parking lot doing laps around his limo shaking his head.

When you look at *The Deep* today and you see that shot... it all worked. It looks like Shaw is in pain and struggling for his life in mortal combat with the eel. But in reality he's smashed and half-laughing at the crap he was putting the crew through. In hindsight, it was pretty funny, but at the time no one thought he was capable of getting

**RECEIVING INSTRUCTIONS.** Sean Connery and Al Giddings in Bahamas shooting the James Bond movie *Never Say Never Again*.

**IN THE DRINK.** Al Giddings signals to start filming underwater sequence with Robert Shaw on the 1867 wreck of the *Rhone* during ocean sequences in British Virgin Islands, 1976.

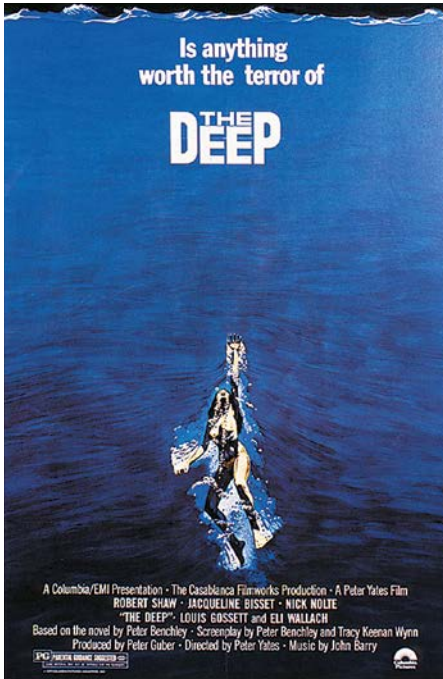
Photos: Al Giddings (private) (2)





1976

**TREASURE HUNTERS.** Jackie Bisset, Robert Shaw and Nick Nolte filming sequence of *The Deep* on the underwater set in Bermuda, 1976.



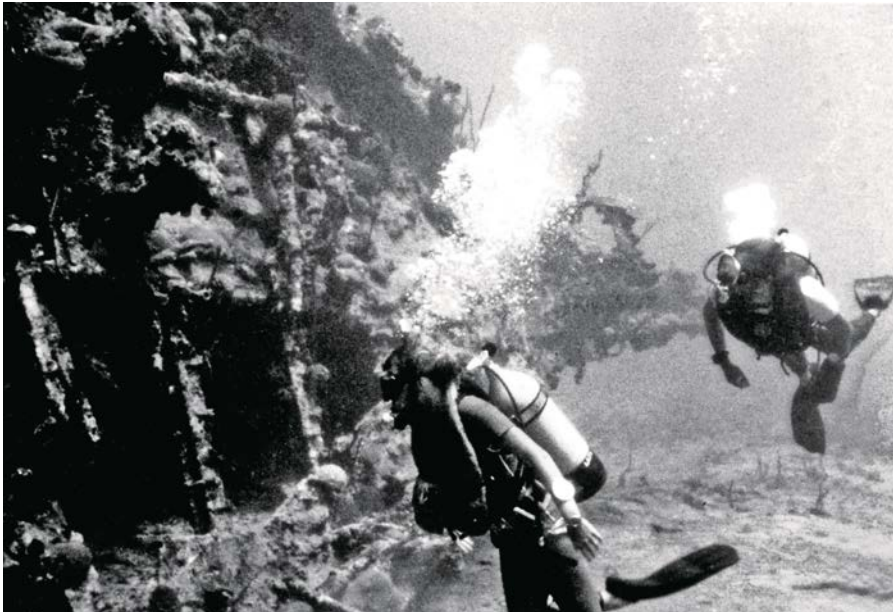
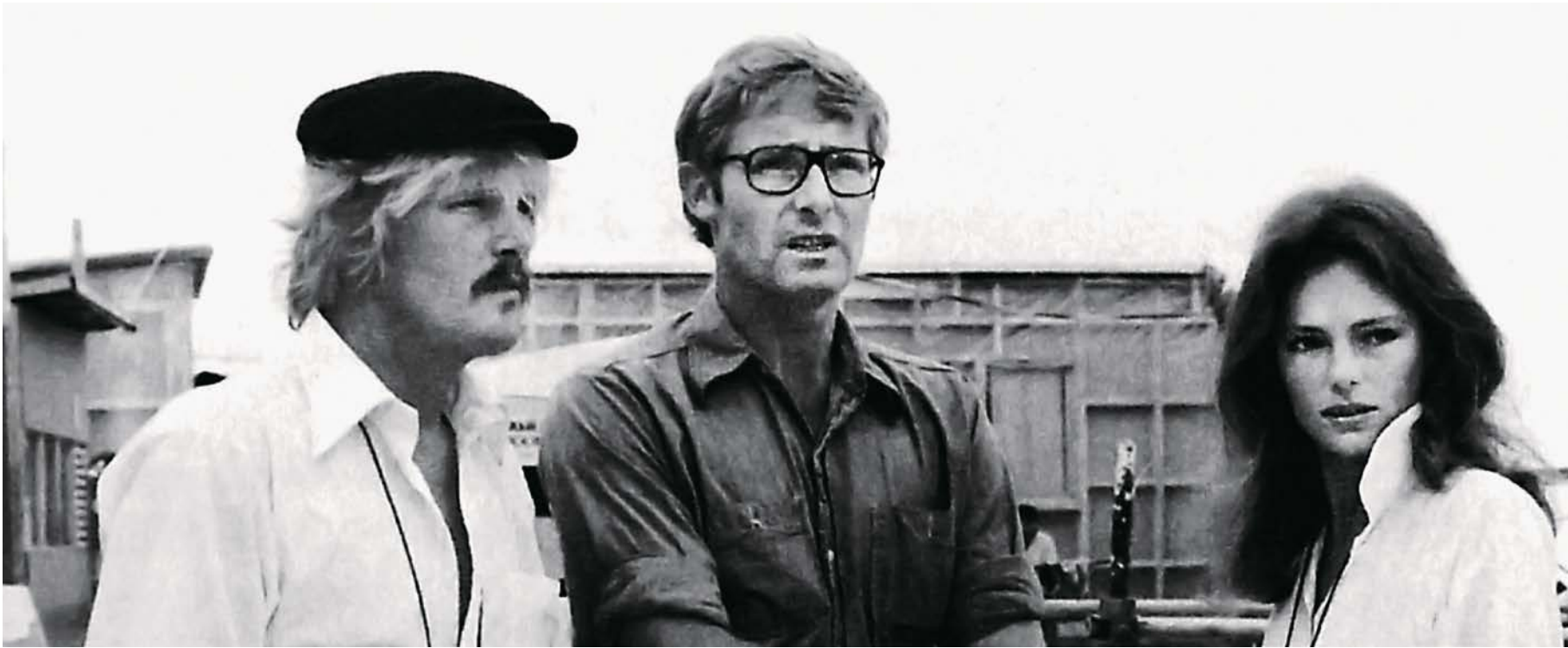
through it. *The Deep* went on to be huge hit and the most profitable underwater film of the era. The ocean location work in the BVI on the deep *Rhone* wreck alone lasted 35 consecutive days with 1,465 dives and a perfect safety record. Giddings was established as Hollywood’s “go to” underwater director.

He went on to work on scores of other films and documentaries, but his next big break came when a relatively new director contacted him about working on a film that would set an entirely new level of underwater filmmaking. It was a visionary guy named James Cameron and he had written a screenplay for a movie called *The Abyss*. The film was to be shot completely underwater at a simulated depth of 2,000 feet! Only a few screen minutes showed surface scenes of some Navy ships. Giddings immediately knew he wanted in.

“*The Abyss* was historic. It was one of those special projects that only come along once in a lifetime. James Cameron was committed to doing something that was totally believable. He was an excellent diver and a consummate filmmaker, and

unlike any other director I had ever worked with. We used 10,640 dive tanks in 90 days on *The Abyss*. Cameron was in the water, shoulder to shoulder with me for all of it. I never expected that. My respect for him, not only as an artist, but as someone who would invest that much personal and physical effort into a project, was immense.”

Like all Cameron projects, which are just sort of bigger than one’s imagination, this was no exception. He and Al went to view an abandoned nuclear power plant in Gaffney, South Carolina. About a half mile away was the main containment vessel. So they climbed an abandoned crane that had been sitting there for seven years and looked down on this massive structure: four-foot-thick walls, 200 feet across, 55 feet deep. This great bowl would make the ultimate underwater super set. Three million dollars later, they had scarfed all of the metal out of this concrete bowl, which had held all of the reactor stuff and painted the entire thing with black dye for a totally black environment. Things were now set in motion for the largest, most extensive underwater set in the world. Eight million gallons of water, filled,



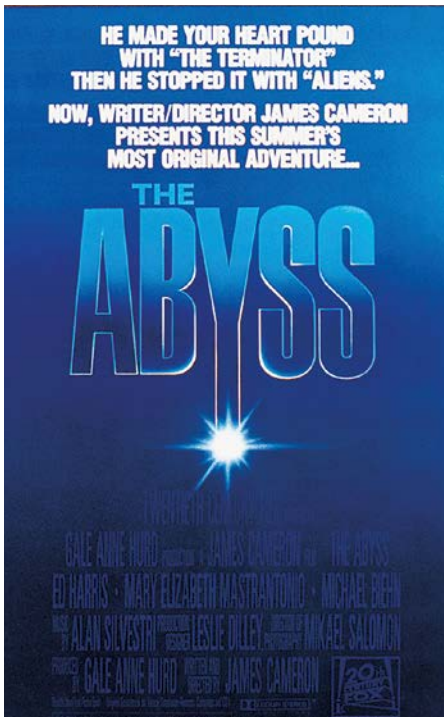
**BERMUDA TRIANGLE.** Nick Nolte, Peter Benchley and Jackie Bisset on location in Bermuda filming *The Deep*.

The 1867 wreck of the *Rhone* used as the real ocean film site for *The Deep*.

Photos: Al Giddings (3)

1976





**DEEP FRIENDSHIP.** Director James Cameron and Al Giddings on location filming *The Abyss*. Photo: Al Giddings (private)

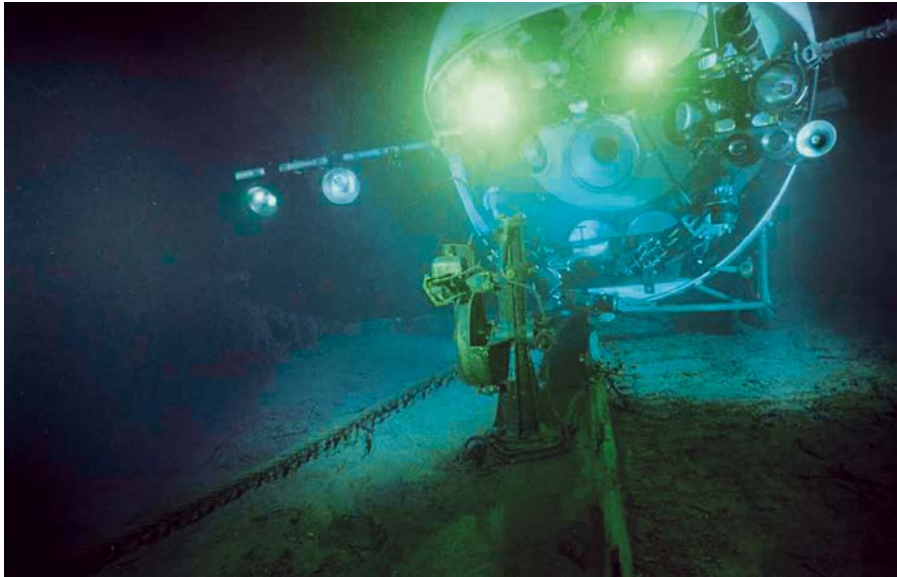
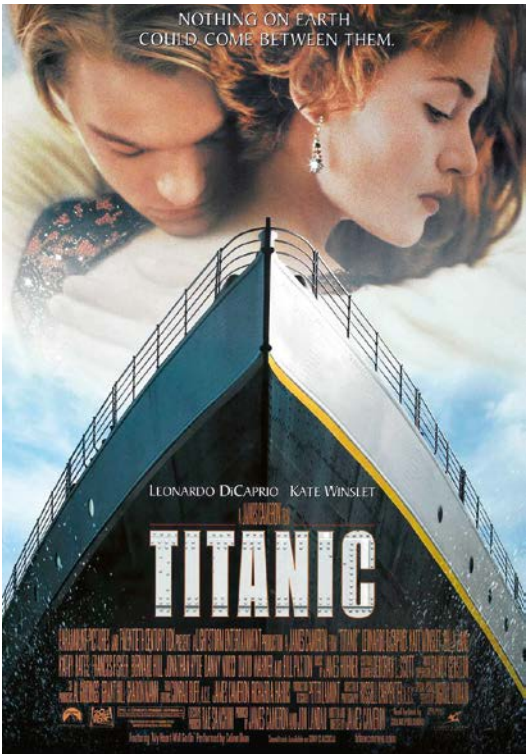
filtered and heated to 81 degrees. A full-sized deep underwater habitat structure was dropped in, along with actual deep submersibles. In Gaffney, they had recreated the underwater world at 2,000 feet! Then the film went into production for five months.

“As soon as I read the script and spoke with Cameron I knew the elements from this picture were not coming from the prop department at Fox Studio. They were coming from the commercial diving world so I called Phil Nuytten. We talked about everything from the helmet-like masks to beam splitters that would put some of the light on the actors’ faces. Once again I took the same approach that I had on *The Deep* years earlier. I wanted to teach Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio, Ed Harris and Michael Biehn how to dive, how to use rebreathers and all the sophisticated gear. The approach was really going to be commercial diving. When production started we would enter the tank at 6:00 in the evening and work on the bottom from 6:00 until 1:00 in the morning. We were shooting at night so we had no light leakage, no daylight. We would come out at 1:00 in

the morning, have lunch, jump in a hot tub right next to the set, warm up, jump back into the set and finish at dawn.” The movie was another success, but achieved even more fame when a Director’s Cut was re-released. That added more scenes and elements to the story line and lengthened the film nearly a half-hour. The new version actually did higher box office gross sales than the original release and critics loved it. People lined up in droves, around the block in some cases, to get in and then gave it standing ovations. Cameron finally was satisfied that his movie was properly done.

Giddings and Cameron were destined to be reunited again on what would be the most profitable movie in history. Al had done a documentary called *Titanic: Treasure of the Deep* and Cameron came to the private screening hosted by Walter Cronkite in Burbank, California, with a limited guest list. At the film’s conclusion, Cameron told Giddings he wanted to dive the *Titanic* himself since he had a concept for a movie script that he had always wanted to do about an ill-fated love story on the tragic voyage. Giddings was flabbergasted that Cameron was willing to personally risk diving to





**FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE.** MIR submersible hovers over *Titanic* wreck.  
Photos: Ocean Media, Inc. (2), Al Giddings (private)

these things are seen as if I was in a wreck swimming with scuba at night. It magically transported me to the real wreck. I wouldn't really know the difference. So Cameron once again championed an entirely new way of presenting the scene, and *Titanic* had an authentic look and feel that had never been accomplished before. How many directors do you know who would go to the *Titanic* itself and jump into a 23-foot-long submarine with a seven-foot diameter interior and go over two miles beneath the North Atlantic?"

Al Giddings continued to make documentary films and IMAX productions until 2003 when he decided to retire and devote his time to his passion for restoring vintage antique cars. He lives in a lavish estate at the foot of a mountain in Montana's beautiful Paradise Valley, just outside Yellowstone National Park. Giddings is arguably the greatest underwater filmmaker in history.

Text: Bret Gilliam  
Photos: Al Giddings (private), Bret Gilliam, Ocean Media Inc.

12,4560 feet in the tiny, deep submersibles. But off they went on a Russian expedition ship and spent over 200 hours on the wreck. When they surfaced from the last dive, Cameron told Al that he was going to find a studio to make his screenplay into a movie. The rest is history. *Titanic* was released in late 1997 and won 11 Academy Awards including Best Picture and Best Director. It was the first movie ever to pass two billion dollars in sales at the box office!

The movie footage they shot from the submersibles went to the prop department and they recreated the interiors of the wreck along with a 90 percent scale model of the ship. Looking through the viewfinders while shooting in the underwater set was like looking at the *Titanic*.

Giddings smiles, "I would look through the viewfinder at night, we would have it lit, the ROV would come around the corner, into the room, flickering light off the mirrors in the Astor suites, the main ball room, the promenade decks. The set was so good it looked like the real wreck. You are seeing the master super wide shots of the *Titanic* as we move up to the doorway, down the hall and around the corner, and the set is so beautiful. You enter the first-class cabin: the fireplace, the wreckage, the safe that they eventually get to. All of



### Divers travel the world

For many divers, not only those in the movies, traveling to remote destinations is essential to experiencing the world's best reefs. It's not just professional photographers who enjoy far-flung destinations; amateur photographers love nature's wonders and enjoy shooting the same scenes as professionals. Any traveling diver will appreciate features in his watch that allow him to set two time zones, the one at home and the one where he is (local time). The 500 Fathoms GMT fits the bill to a tee. One time zone is displayed with the principal hands of the watch, while a second time zone is read with a supplemental hour

hand that reads upon a 24 scale shown on the dial. When the owner travels, the hour hand is easily adjusted in one hour jumps via the crown—forwards or backwards, to fit home or destination time. Nevertheless, all Fifty Fathoms watches can be used to show two time zones using the rotating bezel. To use the bezel for a second time zone has its roots in the military again. In combined NATO forces the main watch hands are used to display *zulu* (GMT) time and/or were set on a time hack with other military unities. So the time-bezel was invented to set different times and/or even timezones—long before it was used to

mark dive time. Example: If your time at home is three hours behind your destination's time (you travel east) place the lozenge that normally would be aligned at "12" back three hours to the "9" indication on your watch face (east is least). The bezel's lozenge now marks the "12" setting of your destination's time for the small, hour hand. The larger minute hand still shows the minutes for both destinations! If your time at home is three hours advanced from your destination (you travel west) turn the bezel from the "12" to the "3" indication on your watch face (west is best). Try a couple of times to get a feeling for it.