

**Jordan Klein**  
by **Eric Hanauer**

*A self-taught mechanic, inventor, tinkerer, and cinematographer, Jordan Klein has worn many hats throughout his underwater career. He was one of Florida's first dive boat skippers, owned one of the first dive shops, and made the first line of American sport diving compressors. He shot Sea Hunt and Flipper, and won an Academy Award for Thunderball. He developed housings for cameras as simple as a point-and-shoot and as complex as professional theatrical movie machines. Still active as a director and cinematographer, Klein is a living link with diving history.*

Jordan displayed an early flair for invention at 14, when he started diving in Miami Beach in the late 1930s. He made his own mask, from an inner tube, copper and some ground glass. Fins were a piece of tire riveted to the bottom of a tennis shoe. To stay down longer, he made a surface-supplied helmet using a refrigerator compressor for air supply. "I think about it today and I shudder. How easily I could have killed myself. (We) just did it to be underwater, in canals and anywhere else. "

When the war began, Klein enlisted in the Navy to attend diving school. "It was all I could do to get through... By the time I got out of there I realized I didn't want to be a commercial diver.. the guys that did it were insane....I did a little more string pulling and got aboard a light cruiser in the Pacific."

After the war, Klein bought a 36-foot diving boat, the *Arbalete*. This was 1947, and the only divers around were free divers spearing fish. "To get business we used to put on shows for free in the hotel pools in Miami Beach...We would just go into the pool and dive to the bottom, and the people

went absolutely nuts...We were beating people off who wanted to go diving. Then we would teach a class at the pool.”

When Aqua-lungs began to arrive, Jordan realized the air compressor situation was less than ideal. He began buying surplus compressors, rebuilding, and selling them all over the country under the Mako trademark.

About this time, Klein got into commercial photography, shooting hotel parties with a Speed Graphic. There he met Jerry Greenberg, another diver and budding underwater photographer. “I didn’t have a good feel for pictures on land, but did underwater.. I started taking people out and photographing them, then selling them (the pictures)...They do it now with video.

“Jerry got excited...talking about underwater photography and asked me to build a housing for his Leica. Then he got interested in the technical problems, so we formed a company called Marine Enterprises. When we split, he started Seahawk Housings and I started Mako. Had I been smart enough from a legal standpoint I probably would have had a basic patent on underwater camera housings.

“I came up with the first O-ring sealing gland, the first O-ring sealing of the housing, and the first housing where you unscrewed the whole front and put the camera in from there. I was building custom stuff out of plastic, brass, aluminum (and) realized that wasn’t a very good business because anyone who had a garage, a drill, and a saw was my competition. So I got out of that and ...designed the Mako Shark, a 120 roll film camera with flash for \$19.95.” (The patent was later sold to Healthways.)

Jordan was essentially spinning his wheels financially when he found a mentor who taught him about money. He was Albert Vanderkogel, chief buyer for Abercrombie & Fitch Sporting Goods. “He saw the camera housings I was building (and) said to me, ‘What are you doing here crapping around on the boat? We can sell this stuff.’ ‘You mean somebody would buy this?’

“Obviously somebody did and he started selling them. Then he said, ‘Why don’t you come up to New York and I’ll show you what life is all about?’ ...So that’s what really got me started in business. He was my teacher. He would ask me, ‘How much does all this cost you?’ I told him and he said, ‘You’ve got to multiply it by five.’ ‘Times five? Why?’ ‘You want to stay in business don’t you?’ He explained to me that my costs weren’t just the plastic. Who’s going to pay for telephone, rent, etc. ?

“The secret to my success is the ability to see what was necessary in the marketplace and make a straight line for that. If what I was doing was needed and not lucrative, that’s got to be second. The priority is where the money is and Vanderkogel was the one (who) got my head in that direction, otherwise I’d be out there pumping gas.”

In 1950, Klein opened the third dive shop in the state of Florida. “I realized I couldn’t keep (both) the boat and the dive shop. My love was on the water but the money was at the shop.” Klein had bought his PT boat in partnership with the head of Jackie Gleason Enterprises, Frank Satenstein. “Frank didn’t want to sell it, but my name was the only one on the title, so I sold the boat. He asked, ‘What are you going to do with the money?’ I said, ‘Half is yours and half is mine.’ From that point on I was off the water, except for filming jobs.”

Satenstein got Jordan his first underwater cinematography assignment, on a TV pilot that never sold. “That’s the first time I ever saw a 16mm Arriflex. I read the cinematographer manual, figured out what speed ...to shoot...If I looked at the photography today I would probably run out of the room.”

When the Andrea Doria sank in July, 1956, Klein got a call from Satenstein. He had talked the network into going out there and doing some filming for the Jack Paar show. “He wanted to do it live with the Electronicam, that shot video and film at the same time. They asked, ‘How long will it take to

build a housing for this?’ I said, ‘You can take care of all the controls from the surface, I can build a pressure proof housing good for 200 to 250 feet in a day or two.’ There was another group going out here already with Harold Edgerton, so there wasn’t much time. I built the box out of steel because I didn’t care if it rusted or not.” He rushed to New York, rented a tugboat and chugged to the site. But Klein had made only one dive when tragedy struck. Edgerton’s son died while using a rebreather that his father designed and built. “That was bigger news than the *Andrea Doria*. After all that panic and all that money, CBS pulled the plug. The package for the Elecetricam worked and I had one dive on the *Doria*.”

Klein continued to do freelance filming and building Arriflex housings. Ivan Tors had hired him for some projects, so when he launched the **Sea Hunt** series, he called on him again. “Ivan told me to go out to the Bahamas and shoot, and see if I can get along with Lamar Boren (chief cinematographer)...I don’t have an ego problem and just deferred to him. Lamar was a very strange guy. If he was here today and his work was compared to everybody else’s he would probably win the Academy Award over what’s available today, and I would probably have to include myself...A difficult guy to work with, he couldn’t get along with Rico Browning (writer and director). He wanted to direct, shoot, swim, be in front and behind the camera, and be the dolphin. There were always arguments.

“The first afternoon, the plan was for us to go in the water back to back, and shoot (two) scenes at the same time. I’m shooting the boat going away and he’s shooting it coming. The water was pretty dirty....all we could see was a shadow go over. After we got out he asked me, ‘Did you get that?’ I said, ‘Lamar, I didn’t shoot it.’ I could have shot it under protest. He said, ‘I didn’t think you were that stupid.’

After that we shot two or three shows at a time. We would do it in spurts; when the topside was done we would match it with underwater. Nowadays when I'm directing, I want to shoot underwater first and let them match it topside, because it's a lot easier. Underwater it becomes very expensive and impractical to reshoot, especially at some remote location."

I asked Jordan for some recollections of the people he worked with on **Sea Hunt**.

Lloyd Bridges: "Bud is a super guy. Here's an example...(After The show ended) my idea was to do a pilot for a series, **Man beneath the Sea**, and use Bud to transition the camera, like Loren Greene in **Last of the Wild**. I figured I could bring him over for a shot going in or out of the water, or on a submarine...I called Bud and said, 'I can give you a week's vacation in Freeport (but) can't afford to pay you anything...You don't have to get in the water very much.'

"He said OK, and flew down. I put him up next to a tennis court, because tennis is his main love. He did all that with no hope of getting anything out of it. (At the 1994 DEMA show) he came up to me and asked, "Jordan, what did you ever do with that show?" I didn't think he would remember me, (it had been) at least 20 years since I've seen him. I was over my head, (and) didn't know what I was doing. So I have the only home movie with Lloyd Bridges. That's incredible in a guy of his stature.

"He never really was diver, he did it because he got the job It's like most people becoming heroes because they are there when it happens. He doesn't make bones about that, he doesn't pretend to be a big hero diver and never has. In fact it really embarrasses him when you call him Mike Nelson...He's not a smartass and doesn't come off like a big time actor, he treats people like they are a friend that he's known for 20 years.

Ivan Tors He was off in never never land, not a business man. He had an affinity for animals, at least he thought he did. He believed that a shark wouldn't attack him under any circumstances because he had paid his dues or something. During **Thunderball** I got a picture of him, standing in the tank and the shark just swims right up to his feet. I said, 'Hey, come on back Ivan, you're going to be about a foot shorter if you don't.' He had great loyalty, often misplaced. That's how he ended up losing his studio in Miami. He was a real friend to a lot of people, including me. He would do anything for them to his own detriment...At one time he had more shows on TV than anybody else and to this day I would bet that nobody has had that many shows running at one time: **Harbormaster, Whirlybird, Cowboy in Africa, Daktari, Flipper.** He was doing shows like they just fell out of the sky during the black and white days...He was really ahead of his time."

Lamar Boren. "A big teddy bear, never wore a wet suit. He was probably the premiere underwater cameraman of his time. He made his own stainless steel housings for his camera, an antique Aikley. Every time he went deeper than 20 feet they would go 'doingg' like an oil can...We were shooting on **Thunderball**, my system was loading in 30 seconds, his would take five minutes...to loosen lots of nuts and bolts. One day he came over to me and said, 'If you load your camera in less than 15 minutes I'm going to get you replaced.' He was not easy to get close to, he didn't pass on information, everything was a mystery and a secret. I learned very little if anything from him in regard to the craft. I liked him, I don't think he liked me. I think he was worried about me."

Courtney Brown. "He was Mike Nelson. He taught Bridges how to dive...Courtney is fun loving, doesn't have a serious thought in his mind other than an overriding fear of everything. The worst is always going to happen. A two fistred drinker, lots of fun,...a good friend, a hard worker, and a frustrated

union shop steward. He'd say, 'I played two guys today so I ought to get paid twice.' sometimes in jest, sometimes not.

"A very big guy, he's gotten bigger and bigger over the years. (He) worked for Ivan in California doing westerns. When **Sea Hunt** began he went to Florida and worked with that crew..Ivan was complaining that Courtney was getting too big, he couldn't use him any more to (double for Bridges). We picked up our shot list every morning at the Western Union office in Nassau. So I sent a (fake) wire, and gave him five bucks. At the end of the shot list (it) said, 'Rico, if this continues we have to reconsider the whole crew. Jordan, if your camera keeps losing frames, we are going to have to replace you. And Courtney, this is your last chance; if you don't start losing weight you are out of there.' Rico is reading it at the restaurant and ...tells Courtney, 'You're in trouble.' Up until a year ago, nobody ever knew I was behind this.

After **Sea Hunt**, Klein shot the **Flipper** series for Tors. He has shot about 50 feature films, and nearly 300 commercials. But his top achievement in Hollywood was the James Bond film, **Thunderball**. "I was supposed to come to the Academy Awards (but) thought we weren't going to win, (so) there's no reason for me to go. They said, 'You should come because you are the person involved most heavily in getting the award. (The actual award went to John Steers, head of special effects.)' I designed and built all the sleds and scooters. (But) I was in the Bahamas getting ready to do a picture. (The crew) went to the hotel to watch the awards, I went to bed. At one in the morning they were shaking me, and told me I got the award. And I was down there shooting a nothing picture with Troy Donahue just for the money."

Jordan has done lots of work with sharks in the movies, and revealed some secrets. "We catch them, tie a line to their tail and tie them to the bottom so they can't breathe. They get lethargic; you can swim them back and forth in front of the camera till they get some oxygen back in their system. If you misjudge that

you won't be able to catch them. We use tigers all the time because they are the most predictable and they look the best. Lemons and bull sharks scare me to death, I won't work with them. Tigers, which look worse, are the best to work with.

“I was shooting a film called **Mako Jaws of Death**...I'm looking through the finder and all of a sudden it goes black. I thought the camera jammed; I see white things, and feel some jerking. The shark has the whole camera in his mouth, he tore the sunshade off, I had to wrench it out...I've put the camera in a shark's mouth a dozen times or more; (it's) got scratches to all over the housing, it ripped the latches off and everything....When you've got something you can give him besides something that bleeds you feel comfortable.

Today, Klein continues to shoot films and commercials, teaming up with his son, Jordan Jr. He also builds custom housings for Betacam, Arriflex, 3D and other exotic cameras. They are out of range of the casual diver, costing from \$14,000 to \$17,00. “I only do them to order; it takes two to three months to build one. I built the first underwater video assist. That lets you send a video image of what you are shooting on film topside to the director or to the client. They can cut the commercial right on the boat.”

At an age when most divers of his era do little more than reminisce about old times, Jordan Klein continues to work underwater, for today and tomorrow.