

You're a *Marine coordinator* what?

by Elka Jones

On a typical day, Dan Malone might be in the Bahamas, recruiting local fishermen to catch a 10-foot tiger shark. Or he could be in a boat on Lake Michigan, helping a camera crew get the perfect shot. Or he might be out in the Pacific Ocean, checking up on underwater divers and equipment.

Dan is a marine coordinator. His job is to synchronize the people and things that make water scenes possible in feature films, documentaries, television shows, and commercials. "When you're on set with the actors, you're making it happen," says Dan. "You're standing right there watching the drama."

Marine coordinators are at the heart of the action when a water scene is being filmed. But filming is typically the culmination of weeks or months of planning and preparation. "Sometimes, what I do is like a corporate office job, except that I get to wear shorts and flip-flops," says Dan. Many of a marine coordinator's tasks are the same as those of any planner. Responsibilities might include making arrangements over the phone, attending meetings, and reviewing documents.

Like many marine coordinators, Dan's involvement in a project begins with a document that is relatively unique to show biz: the script.

The first thing Dan does when he gets a new script is to read it, highlighting the parts that pertain to his work. He studies these scenes and considers how they might be created for filming. Then, he makes a list of everything that will be needed and drafts a budget. The budget includes the projected costs of using docks, hiring marine workers, and renting boats.

Marine coordinators also help choose the proper spot for filming. To do this, Dan usually visits the area where production is scheduled to take place. Once there, he examines nearby rivers, creeks, and shorelines to find several possible locations.

Many of Dan's jobs take place in sun-kissed corners of the world. "I like that I get to travel," he says, "and it's usually in a pretty nice place that we're filming." His longest assignment—working on a movie about pirates—required him to spend 9 months in the Caribbean.

When scouting for the perfect site, Dan isn't just looking for picturesque scenery. He also takes into account several practical considerations. Among these are that the water needs to be deep enough to accommodate

the boats; there must be a dock large enough to support the filming company and its equipment, which can include dozens of trucks, actors' dressing rooms, wardrobe trailers, and other vehicles; and the surroundings typically cannot be heavily populated with people or buildings.

Dan then collects pictures and information on his chosen locations and the boats that will be used. He presents the results of his preliminary work, along with his budget proposal and other ideas, to the project's director. Based on the director's artistic vision, Dan might need to revise parts of his plan.

After his ideas have been approved, Dan begins arranging details, like locating the boats that are used both onscreen and off, negotiating the cost of boat rentals, and hiring local crews. Such work is usually done on location, and it may involve gathering people and equipment not intended to be seen onscreen. "When you watch a movie, you might see several actors on a boat; you don't see the 60 members of the marine crew and 20 support boats that are also out there in the water," says Dan. The offscreen backup includes camera, shuttle, and water-safety boats and crews—elements that are essential to creating a scene on the water.

Marine coordinators also ensure that everything goes smoothly, particularly during filming. Safety often becomes a large part of this responsibility. One of the biggest obstacles, says Dan, is the weather. "The wind can create big waves," he says. "The director might say he wants to keep filming, and I'll have to tell him it isn't safe." When that happens, the director, however reluctant, usually must bow to the marine coordinator's expertise.

Dan's expertise stems from his varied practical experience. A former beach patrol lifeguard, he is also a certified diver. And he knows about the ocean's impact on vessels: he has been a boat captain for nearly 20 years, so he is well attuned to the dangers of the sea.

"Most marine coordinators start out as boat captains or divers," says Dan. "But you also have to know how to manage people." Dan gained some

Elka Jones is a contributing editor with the OOO, (202) 691-5719.

Lights! Camera! Aquatic action!

When onscreen scenes involve water, Dan Malone helps keep the production afloat.

understanding of management principles when he earned a master's degree in marine affairs from the University of Miami. "That isn't necessary for becoming a marine coordinator," Dan says of his graduate education, "but it definitely looks good on a resume."

Dan honed his management abilities when he owned and operated a charter boat business that arranged diving trips to the Bahamas. On these trips, Dan began to work on wildlife documentaries for a number of sponsors. "We'd go out on my charter boat and film things like sharks, dolphins, and whales," says Dan.

As he started to gain contacts in the film industry, Dan learned of additional opportunities. Now, it's his prior work experience that helps him find new jobs.

Marine coordinators usually freelance, which means that they are hired for one job at a time. As a result, they may have periods in which they have no jobs at all—or stretches in which they are extremely busy. After all, says Dan, "You have to work when the work is there." And when Dan works, he works hard, sometimes putting in up to 12 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Not all of Dan's interests on the high seas have led to moneymaking ventures. Fortunately, though, his current work is the profitable kind. Dan estimates that an experienced marine coordinator working on a 3-month feature film could earn about \$80,000.

Work on commercials, which is harder to secure, often pays even

better, he says.

As with many occupations, however, marine coordinators should expect to earn less when they are getting started in this career. Beginning coordinators may find that the allotted budget barely covers expenses, particularly if they're working on a small-scale, low-budget project. Yet these jobs offer preparation, experience, and contacts that can lead to higher paying work.

And the importance of such considerations cannot be disregarded in the film industry. "It's competitive, for sure," says Dan. "In this business, a lot of it is who you know."

Getting to know people is one of the things that Dan likes best about his job, in fact. "The chance to meet all sorts of very interesting people with different backgrounds is great," he says. But what Dan enjoys most about his work is the excitement and variety that comes with riding the tide. "You don't have any idea what you'll do next," he says. "And then, all of a sudden, the phone rings...."

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