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The Journal of the Society of Camera Operators

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David E Elkins soc

In 1968 at the age of 14, while editing the family 8mm home movies, David E. Elkins, SOC had no idea he would one day have a successful career as an assistant cameraman and camera operator.

He graduated from the University of Connecticut in 1976 with a degree in Mathematics. Originally Elkins planned on a career teaching mathematics or possibly working in the computer field. These plans changed dramatically in 1980, while he was recovering from major surgery: He decided it was time to do something new and different with his life. On June 16, 1980 he packed up his car and headed for Los Angeles.

During the first few years in LA he worked in the retail field while trying to decide what it was he really wanted to do. Living so close to Hollywood his interest in the film industry just got stronger. Having read scores of magazines and books on filmmaking he felt he would benefit from attending a film school. David enrolled in Columbia College-Hollywood, concentrating on the study of cinematography and graduated Cum Laude in 1985 with a degree in film production.

His first professional film job was working in craft services on a low

budget feature film where many of his college classmates were crew members. Then he became 2nd AC on some second-unit shooting for the film. That job led to other jobs as a second assistant and his career was on its way. He continued to work as a second assistant for approximately two years. Elkins joined NABET Local 531 in late 1986, and started to work more as a first assistant around the same time. In 1989 he became a member of the International Cinematographers Guild as a first assistant cameraman.

David has assisted or served as camera operator for many exceptional cinematographers including John Schwartzman ASC, Victor Goss ASC, Marvin Rush ASC, Randy Sellars, Mark Woods, Richard Clabaugh, Anthony Palmieri and many others on commercials, music videos, television series and feature films. His credits include *The Wonder Years*, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Gabriel's Fire* for television, music videos for the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Coolio and the Beastie Boys, commercials for McDonalds and Life Savers, feature films *Waxwork*, *Clair of the Moon*, *Red Surf* and many more.



While working steadily as a first assistant cameraman, David was asked by Columbia College-Hollywood to develop a new course to train students in the craft of becoming an assistant cameraman. During the time he was preparing and then teaching the class he compiled an extensive collection of notes detailing all of the responsibilities of the job. While showing these

notes to some of his colleagues it was suggested that he try to get them published. He sent a copy of the notes to Focal Press in Boston and five weeks later received a contract in the mail to write what would become *The Camera Assistant's Manual*.

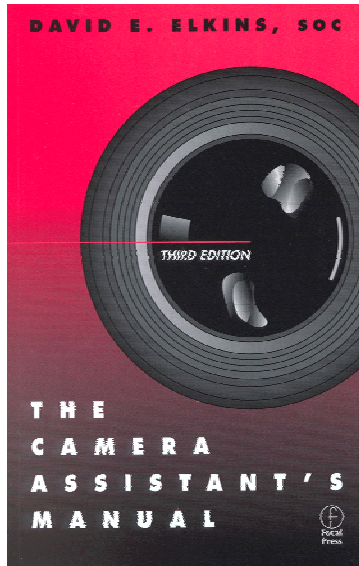
Elkins' Manual has gone through many stages since first being published in 1991. It is currently in its third edition, has been translated into Spanish and has consistently been a best seller for Focal Press. The book is used all over the world by beginning filmmakers as well as working professionals. (See review on next page.) As a result of the success of the first edition, the publishers asked Elkins to write another book for their Focal Handbooks series. This book, *Camera Terms and Concepts* was published in 1993.

David is currently employed as a Filmmaker-in-Residence at the North Carolina School of the Arts School of Filmmaking where he is the chairman of the cinematography faculty. (See *Operating Cameraman* June-July 2000.) He continues to work as a camera operator and also does 1st AC work when the opportunity arises, and splits his time between North Carolina and his home in Connecticut.

Check out his web site at www.thecameradepartment.com/elkins for his complete resume and list of credits.



Book Review



The Camera Assistant's Manual

By David E Elkins SOC
Focal Press

This is Elkins' third edition of *The Camera Assistant's Manual* and as such is testament to a successful publication. My question is, where was such a manual when I was a fledgling loader/2nd camera assistant? There would have been one less flashed roll (unexposed, thank God!) and one less dropped center core, that's for sure! Elkins has fulfilled an invaluable role in providing students and neophyte camera assistants with this nuts and bolts manual. He delves into areas that heretofore could only be learned in the school of hard knocks, i.e., on-the-job. But then there's that Catch-22, how does one get the job? He even covers that topic from résumés to interviews. From a step-by-step technical guide to the psychology of on-set behavior, Elkins spans the gamut of learning how to become a camera assistant in the film and television industry.

Following his manual closely can avoid reinventing the proverbial wheel in countless situations. In time all good assistants develop their own

working systems that function best for them but Elkins' manual offers a standard by which one can learn. He points out that flexibility is key and one must learn to adapt to the ways of one's superior. *The Camera Assistant's Manual* is chock full of technical information, diagrams, charts and tables in its 394 pages that pertain specifically to the working duties of the camera assistant.

At first I admit I was bothered by what seemed to be a fair amount of repetition from chapter to chapter. On further reading I realized the wisdom of his ways. Repetition of orders and information is paramount to clear concise communication amongst crew members. A good Assistant always repeats the T-stop or filter pack, lens focal length, etc. to the DP when given this information by the DP. The apparent redundancy in Elkins' style simply reinforces this all-important aspect of the camera assistant's job responsibilities. Better to check and double check rather than let something fall through the crack, possibly resulting in disaster. Speaking of checking, Elkins numerous "checklists" during prep and production for the 2nd and 1st AC are priceless. Again, most of us have to learn this from other camera assistants through trial and error, ultimately developing our own system.

I'd like to touch on one area in his chapter on focus-pulling which he overlooked. Though specific knowledge of depth of field and lens characteristics is critical, it's equally important to understand that focus-pulling is an art. Developing a sense of timing and feeling the nuances of a scene or an actor's movements can only be accomplished with experience and that takes time. This is what separates a technician from a craftsman.

Although *The Camera Assistant's Manual* is specifically aimed at individuals just beginning their careers as camera assistants, there is much useful information for the seasoned assistant as well. One can never know it all and with new equipment and technology coming online every day, upgrading one's knowledge and expe-

rience is mandatory. Because of this fact, I'm sure we can look forward to a fourth edition of *The Camera Assistant's Manual* when deemed necessary. In the meantime glean all you can from this one.

—George B. Stephenson SOC