



# BUMP IN THE NIGHT

SHOOTING *GHOST HUNTERS*  
PROVES TO BE AS SCARY AS SOME OF  
THE INVESTIGATIVE SERIES' SUBJECTS.



PHOTO AND INSET: LES STONE

Above: TAPS teammates Jason Hawes (left) and Grant Wilson.  
Left: TAPS team member Brian Harnois.

There's rarely an easy day in reality television production, but the challenges abound when you're following not just the living, but the dead as well.

For the past three years, a star in the Sci Fi Channel's programming has been the supernatural-steeped *Ghost Hunters*, which documents the investigations of The Atlantic Paranormal Society (TAPS) as they travel the country chasing claims of otherworldly infestations.

Formed in 1990 by Jason Hawes, TAPS is a collection of everyday people on a mission to either belie suspected poltergeist phenomena or capture hard evidence that it exists.

Reality TV veteran Craig Piligian (*Survivor*, *American Chopper*, *Dirty Jobs*) and his Pilgrim Films created *Ghost Hunters*, which follows Hawes and TAPS co-founder Grant Wilson—former Roto-Rooter plumbers by day, spirit seekers by night—and their rag-tag team of investigators.

"Originally, the show was very run-and-gun," attests Dave Hobbes, *Ghost Hunters'* original director of photography, who began on the show as a camera operator. "Our job was just to follow the TAPS members and document what they did. That was certainly challenging with limited gear and crew. We'd basically rig their vehicle for the drive-to—catching their discussion of the case en route—and then, once we arrived at the location, scramble to pull the camera out of the car and follow them into their initial interviews. When we started the show, there was no director of photography—just myself and two other operators—but, after a while, I put myself out there to take control of the camera department. Jay Bluemke, the show's original director, supported me and gave me the backing to streamline our approach."

Looking for compact, quality production cameras, *Ghost Hunters* turned to three Panasonic AG-DVX100As as the crew's

Below: The *Ghost Hunters* production crew at the TAPS field office in Rhode Island. From left: B-camera operator Kendall Whelpton, AC Shawn Aponik (who recently replaced Nick Ferrelli), DP Brian Hodge, C-camera operator Drew Nicoletto, second sound operator (A2) Alan Jarmolinski and camera PA Adam Abelson.



primary units. The show, shot in 30p, utilizes the DVXs to cover interviews, background footage, initial location walk-throughs, evidence analysis and some in-car footage.

Much of the show takes place in the dead of night, as TAPS searches for signs of the departed. The *Ghost Hunters* crew captures this nocturnal action with the smaller Panasonic AG-DVC30 because of its superior infrared shooting capabilities. The DVC30 is shot in 60i in "frame mode" for a simulated progressive image. An additional Sony DSR-PD150 and an assortment of Sony XC-555 lipstick cameras are used for special situations as well as additional in-car camera setups for the second and third official TAPS vehicles. The lipstick cams connect to Sony GV-D1000 MiniDV clamshell recorders, which record in 60i.

Hobbes hired on two camera operators, Kendall Whelpton and Brian Hodge, for B- and C-camera duties, respectively, and the trio completed the show's first two seasons together.

During the six-month hiatus between seasons two and three, Pilgrim drafted Hobbes to become the DP for *American Chopper*—so when *Ghost Hunters* production resumed, Hodge was invited to take over the reins of the camera department.

"We're always under the gun and working with a limited amount of gear and time," Hodge explains. "We've got to make sure whatever we bring with us is versatile and compact, and that dictates a lot of decisions about gear. Both the DVX and the DVC30 are great cameras because they're so compact. There are so many times that we're stuck in very tight spaces that we simply wouldn't get into with larger cameras."

Hodge added Drew Nicoletto as his C-camera operator and Nick Ferrelli as their lone camera assistant, charged with handling all three operators and the multitude of production cameras.

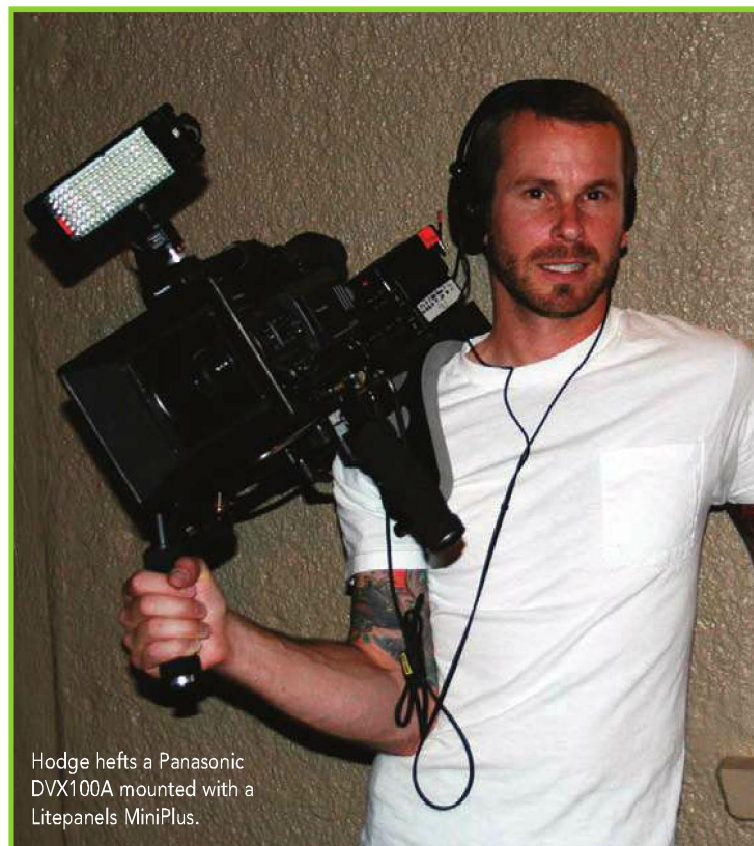
"Toward the end of season three, we brought on a camera PA, but, otherwise, that's our crew," Hodge explains. "So the AC position is very critical. He's responsible for three primary cameras, as well as coordinating and organizing the multitude of tapes we shoot each night from the DVXs, the DVC30s, the lipsticks and the PD150. He's also involved as a gaffer. It's a tough position. In addition, he's responsible for dubbing all the tapes to send off to editorial—so he gets very little sleep."

A two-man team handles audio—one paired with Hodge and the A-camera, and another with Whelpton on B-camera. They use Lectrosonics transmitters and receivers, as well as the AG-DVC30's optional audio breakout box, which accepts XLR inputs.

For a documentary-style show that takes place mostly in the dark, there's a considerable amount of lighting going on.

"We do our best to light any situation that we can," attests Hodge. "We'll light the in-car stuff, if necessary, the initial interviews with the clients and the initial walk through the location. We light the case introductions, research and evidence analysis in the TAPS office, too. We want to control as much as we can, and get the best image we can, but still stay flexible."

The main *Ghost Hunters* lighting package consists of a small Kino Flo kit, featuring a 2-foot 4-bank and two 2-foot 2-banks, and a sizeable ARRI kit consisting of two 300Ws, two 650Ws,



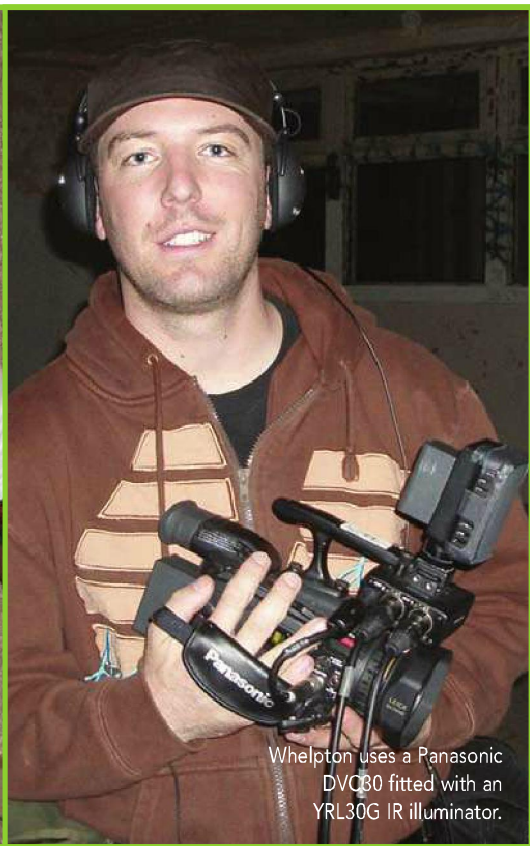
Hodge hefts a Panasonic DVX100A mounted with a Litepanels MiniPlus.

two open-face 1Ks and a 2K light. While following the TAPS members and clients around locations for their initial walk-throughs, Hodge and Whelpton have Litepanels MiniPlus units mounted on their DVXs, supplementing that with Litepanels 1x1s that can be easily moved around with them.

"The Litepanels fixtures are fantastic—they're lightweight, compact, and don't put out any heat but give us a lot of light," Hodge notes. "We started working on the show with Frezzi lights on the cameras, which were awesome, but they were a bit too spotty, [and] I certainly don't miss the heat they generate."

When the lights go out, Hodge and crew switch over to the DVC30s and turn on the infrared emitters. The DVC30s come with built-in IR emitters, but Hodge and crew also implement an additional Panasonic AG-YRL30G on-camera IR illuminator.

"Working in IR is definitely tricky," attests Hodge. "You think you're a decent camera operator, and all of a sudden your world gets turned around when you're walking in complete darkness. You can see everything in the camera viewfinder, but it's so bright in relationship to the environment that if you try and look away, you can't see anything around you at all. You have no reference point for where you are, where you're going or what might be in your way. You're trying to move around completely blind while still working to cover what the TAPS guys are doing and compose the shot. We always do a detailed walk-through beforehand, when the lights are still on, to get a feel for what kinds of dangers we're going to be facing; what kinds of obstacles we need to keep in mind in each area of a location. You always want to



Whelpton uses a Panasonic DVCPRO HD fitted with an YRL30G IR illuminator.

## GHOST HUNTERS

### TOOLKIT

**CAMERAS:** 3 Panasonic AG-DVX100As, 3 Panasonic AG-DVC30s, 1 Sony DSR-PD150, 3 Sony XC-555 Lipstick cameras, 3 Sony D1000 Clamshell recorders, 3 Birns & Sawyer clip-on matte boxes, 3 Birns & Sawyer Image 2000 Shoulder mount (for DVX), 1 Jimmy Jib Lite, 1 Canon 30D with Canon TC80 intervalometer (time-lapse)

**LIGHTING:** 3- Panasonic AG-YRL30G Infrared illuminators, 3 LitePanels MiniPluses, 1 Kino Flo Miniflo kit, 1 Kino Flo 2' 4-bank, 2 Kino Flo 2' 2-banks, 2 ARRI 300W Fresnels, 2 ARRI 650W Fresnels, 2 ARRI 1K open faces, 1 ARRI 2K Fresnel, 2 LitePanels 1x1s, 1 1,000-watt Honda portable generator, Assortment of suction cup grips, Matthews mini grip heads and mini Cardellini clamps for car rigging

**CREW:** 1 Director of photography/A-camera operator, 2 Additional operators, 1 Camera assistant /gaffer/tech, 2 Audio mixers, 1 Camera PA

note where the stairs are or where there's a low overhang. It's very, very challenging and a whole new way of thinking about operating in an otherwise blind world.

"Exposing in IR is a bit different than in visible light, too," adds the DP. "Once you put the camera into IR mode, the iris opens up completely and you use the camera's gain to control your exposures. We have between +3 and +18 dB of gain. The illuminators have a spot and flood function and that helps to give us a bit more control. If the TAPS guys are across the room, we'll spot the emitter in to get them, or flood it out if they come close. You're generally watching the zebras to maintain good exposure, but the tricky part is the IR light falls off very quickly and you have to be aware of your backgrounds and try to balance exposure so the guys don't look like they're always in this black void."

During the first season of *Ghost Hunters*, Hobbes pushed for an additional B-roll day to help the camera crew catch up on lost time during the investigations. Now the production team

spends two nights at each location; one following TAPS through their investigation and a second to shoot exteriors and detailed B-roll material.

"On the initial nights, we shoot the introductions and walk-through, then we go to lights-out and shoot the investigation," explains Hodge. "This is all run-and-gun. Generally we leave one camera wherever TAPS sets up their command center, and A- and B-camera follow the remaining teams. There are usually two TAPS teams going through a location. One camera follows each team.

"This season, we changed up the schedule a bit. We work a five-day week. Thursday night is our main investigation with the TAPS team, Friday is our B-roll night. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday are for the analysis of the investigation, any outside research and the 'reveal' with the client. On Thursday we're at a new location and start all over. We try to keep the days down to 12 hours, but they're aggressive 12-hour days. We're a small crew and it's trying at times, but once you pull it off, it's rewarding." **DV**



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