

On the trail of the **BOMB HUNTERS**

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“Dusty, dirty, hot, and altogether exhilarating,” is how documentary filmmaker and EOU alum Skye Fitzgerald described his camp on the other side of the world in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Since the beginning of October 2004, Fitzgerald and his two full-time crew members have been in Cambodia making a film that will tell the shocking, yet not uncommon story of a people surrounded by the remnants of war: The story of the bomb hunters.

The countryside of Cambodia and Vietnam is riddled with unexploded bombs dropped by different military forces throughout the 1970's. According to the spring 2002 edition of *Focus* magazine, it is estimated that 350,000 tons of unexploded ordnance and land mines



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Photo/Chris G. Parkhurst
Fitzgerald's camera was rolling while Oan, pictured at left, cut open a 1,000-pound bomb to separate the detonators, TNT and metal for recycling with the help of his son and another man. Oan is a key member of a group of local villagers who sometimes harvest UXO for profit in the Kampong Thom Province in Cambodia.

remain hidden in Vietnam alone. An article published in the *Phnom Penh Post* in January 2005 reports that the deliberate handling of unexploded ordnance (UXO) is the leading cause of UXO and landmine related casualties in Cambodia.

“Where else are you going to see a man squatting on top of a bomb, hacksaw in hand, puffing on a cigarette as he tries to choose the safest place to begin the cut?” Fitzgerald asked.

It was in 2001 that Fitzgerald, a 1993 graduate of EOU, first visited Cambodia and became committed to telling this story. He was co-producing the feature film



Submitted photo

Documentary filmmaker Skye Fitzgerald rides the rails in Honduras.



Photo/Patricia Duncan

A member of the Halo Trust Explosive Ordnance Disposal Team prepares to destroy a mix of mortars, grenades, cannon and artillery shells at a designated site near Polpet, Cambodia. The humanitarian organization uses the explosive C4 to destroy the ordnance.

"Monsoon Wife" with a cast and crew from Oregon and Los Angeles and made connections with several individuals while on site.

"The stories of former Khmer Rouge and government soldiers retrieving landmines and UXO from the ground long after the armed conflicts were resolved fascinated me," said Fitzgerald. "The more research I did, the more I realized that the stories are a lingering legacy of armed conflict in many areas of the world."

Fitzgerald has discovered that this legacy abounds with blatant ironies. Locals working as deminers turn a profit in the UXO recycling business – a profit that is barely worth the obvious risks, but is often one of the only viable sources of income.

The metal salvaged from the bombs is sold to scrap yards, the majority of which are located in the town of Poipet, in north-western Cambodia. Mountains of metal are sorted through and then shipped to smelting yards in Thailand.

"It is here that we have come to discover the economics of war debris," he said of the scrap yards. "Hundreds of rockets, mortars, and bombs lay in varying states of decay. A mother was rocking her child to sleep 50-feet away. Children walked through the piles to get to their huts. Dogs slept nearby."

The filmmaker is quick to point out that the driving force behind this dangerous work is not always monetary. Most of the time, villagers are simply clearing the land in order to plant crops and make the area where they live safer.

Flying down the bumpy dirt roads on motorcycles with equipment strapped to their backs, Fitzgerald and his crew arrived at a location deep in the jungle where a villager discovered a bomb. Safety is always a concern when preparing to film such a process. Whenever a situation became too risky, Fitzgerald employed body-mounted micro cameras on the person disassembling the bomb.

"I believe deeply that the risk shouldn't be a deterrent to an important story being told, even if it is a challenge to shoot," he said.

Always supportive, Fitzgerald's family has come to grips with the risks he does take. His fiancé, Patricia Duncan, a professor at Portland State University who is also involved with the project, is more adamant that he follow the safety first rule.

"She is a constant and gentle reminder that no shot is worth stepping on a landmine," he said.

Fitzgerald received a Fulbright Scholar Award last year, enabling him to research and produce his film on a much shorter timeline, and has just returned from his six-month stay in Asia. Upon completion, an hour-long film will be released domestically to broadcast television in the U.S. under the title, "Bombhunters." DVD's will be distributed internationally, and Fitzgerald plans to follow-up with public service announcements to help increase awareness and seek grant money for the populations at risk. He has been working closely with Phon Kaseka of the Institute of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, and with Clear Path International, an organization dedicated to helping survivors of landmine and UXO related accidents in Vietnam and Cambodia.

Fitzgerald's research illustrates the stark reality of the human will, struggling to survive against all odds and adapt to whatever the environment may be. In this reality, extraordinary things become ordinary, and people go on with their daily routine.

"When people are surrounded by the remnants of war on a daily basis - when they wake up next to them, step over them on their way to school, and use them to build their houses out of – they become commonplace."



Photo/Chris G. Parkhurst
An amputee holds a mortar deposited at the "Kilo 4" scrap yard in Poipet, Cambodia. His job requires that he render ordnance safe to sell to metal buyers in Thailand. To do this, he must pound open the mortars with a large hammer.

To learn more about Fitzgerald's work in Cambodia and the pending release of his film, and for those interested in contributing to the production and distribution costs, send an e-mail to skyefitzgerald@gmail.com.