

Desperation intersects with residue of destruction in 'Bombhunters' documentary

By INARA VERZEMNIEKS | THE OREGONIAN

The story he chose to tell takes place in Cambodia, but it could just as well be Afghanistan, Iraq or Darfur — anywhere that people must learn to live with what war leaves behind.

In Cambodia, it left behind a countryside littered with unexploded bombs, mortar shells, rockets, grenades and land mines, the residue of years of conflict — from secret carpet-bombings of the country by the U.S. in an attempt to cut off North Vietnamese supply routes along the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the battles between the Cambodian government, the Khmer Rouge and Vietnamese forces. These visible reminders of a country's destruction, as Skye Fitzgerald was about to discover, had also become a very real means of its survival.

Fitzgerald, a theater major who realized a passion for documentary filmmaking while attending graduate school at the University of Oregon, first traveled to Cambodia in 2001 as a co-producer on a feature film. While there, he heard about an unsettling phenomenon: Men in need of a little extra money risked their lives to hunt down unexploded ordnance — or UXO — buried in fields or lodged in riverbeds.

They dismantled the live munitions, then sold the remains to scrap-metal dealers in order to support their families.

As Fitzgerald saw it, "This was a story about the legacy of war and the generational impact of war, long after the conflict has ended." When he returned home, he pitched the idea of a documentary on the phenomenon to a number of networks. "They said this is a great story, and — no one wants to see it."

Fitzgerald knew it wasn't an easy subject. "It's dark, it has the taint of culpability attached to it," he says. But he was determined to see the documentary made. "There really was a sense of urgency for him around the topic, and he couldn't ignore it," says his wife, Patti Duncan, an associate professor of women's studies at Portland State University. "He was going to do it regardless of



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Skye Fitzgerald is reflected in the glass at Rex Post Studio, as Sophorn Cheang helps him prepare his documentary "Bombhunters" for broadcast in Cambodia later this year, by translating the English portions of the film into Khmer.

whether funding came through."

At 10 p.m. Tuesday, Fitzgerald's documentary, "Bombhunters," will air on OPB television as part of the Oregon Lens series. Despite the initial round of rejection that Fitzgerald faced, a fascinating collection of groups wound up backing his project — the Sundance Institute (which last month announced a work-in-progress grant for "Bombhunters"), the State Department, the congressionally funded United States Institute of Peace, and perhaps most impressively, the Fulbright Program, which hon-

ored Fitzgerald with a research award that allowed him to spend six months researching and filming in Cambodia.

Recently, Fitzgerald met with Cambodian officials to arrange for the documentary's broadcast on public television there, perhaps by the end of the year. And on a recent afternoon, at a recording studio in Southeast Portland, Fitzgerald started the process of dubbing the English portions of the documentary into Khmer for the Cambodian version. He had recruited two young members of the Cambodian-

American Community of Oregon to help with the task.

"When your parents see this back home, they'll say, 'That's my daughter's voice,'" he told one of them, Sophorn Cheang, after they had recorded a few lines of dialogue. He said it with genuine excitement.

"I think they've heard it enough," she said and laughed, but she looked pleased at the thought.

Fitzgerald, who is tall with a shock of curly hair and the chiseled limbs of an avid biker and mountain climber, spent his high school years homesteading with his family on 160 acres near the Eastern Oregon town of Monument.

There was no running water, plumbing or electricity. "It's in the middle of a national forest, the nearest neighbor is eight miles away, and even then, you have to cross the creek twice," says his mother, Fanny Fitzgerald.

Skye Fitzgerald recalls spending a lot of time reading by propane lantern, lost in books, in stories. When he talks about what he does, he almost always refers to himself as "a filmmaker, a storyteller," as though the two are inseparable in his mind.

He is the kind of man who, when he was hired to film a documentary about the 50th anniversary of the first American to climb Mount Everest, "didn't talk at all about meeting Jim Whittaker, or what base camp was like," says his friend Scott Hoelscher, "All he wanted to talk about were the local porters and how they didn't have the right equipment and what he could do to help them."

When Fitzgerald and Duncan married in April, they asked guests to skip giving gifts and instead consider donating money to worthy causes, including the Cambodian-American Community of Oregon, which Fitzgerald felt had been instrumental in supporting his documentary, from sponsoring the first public screening of the film to hooking him up with translators. Even when the couple received a little

extra money for their honeymoon in Cambodia, they wound up giving it all away when they were there to people who they knew needed it more.

From one of Fitzgerald's e-mails home, while filming in Cambodia:

"We have been in country for three weeks, and the film is progressing nicely... We are currently in Kompong Thom, approximately 3 hours north of Phnom Penh, which was bombed erratically by multiple forces in the early 1970s.

A week ago we were contacted by a scrap metal seeker who searches for scrap to sell to scrap metal houses in central Cambodia. We had interviewed him earlier, and he contacted us to inform us that a friend had found a bomb...

The process of documenting how a small group of people is able to pull a huge, unexploded 1,000 lb bomb from 25 feet below the ground has been eye-opening. To witness our subjects then straddle the bomb and — smoking all the while — take a hacksaw to it in order to extract the TNT has been somewhat harrowing.

The ethical dilemmas abound. Multiple times we have asked our subjects whether or not they would go through this process regardless of our presence (as well as remind them of the volatile combination of cigarettes and TNT). The truth seems to be that UXO recycling for profit is going to exist as long as there are bombs in the ground, a market to sell them to, and poverty-ridden people living in contaminated areas...

I can only hope that, by successfully disseminating this film to the largest possible audience, more resources will be committed to the very real need to clear our world of UXO and land mines, and of course, to help the most desperate people of all societies...

There is no narrator in Fitzgerald's documentary, just a series

of stories told from the point of view of the various people whose lives intersect with the phenomenon of bomb-hunting. A 13-year-old severely injured by a blast as he and some friends scouted for UXO. A 49-year-old man who does wildlife habitat work but must supplement his income with bomb-hunting, because, as his wife says simply, "We are poor, that's why we have to do this." The young widow who lost her husband when she was still pregnant with their second child, and who cries as she recalls that she had no money for a proper burial, so she cremated his body come morning. The man who, toward the end of the film, makes a simple statement that seems to sum up the whole sad irony of it all. "The bombs used to hunt for us," he says, "but now we hunt for the bombs."

In some cases, the film is literally told from the bombhunters' point of view, as cameras mounted to their heads offer a jittery first-hand account of what it's like to do this work. You can hear their breathing, feel the moments where they tense up with worry.

It would be easy for a film such as this to dissolve into the voyeuristic horror of it all — *how could they do that?* But for his part, Fitzgerald says, "I earned an appreciation for their tenacity and courage and their willingness to do anything to help their family survive," and he does his best to impart that sense to the rest of us.

Fitzgerald is nowhere to be seen in the film. And yet he is a part of it, as much as any of us are.

At one point, Fitzgerald says, he and his crew were filming a group of men digging out an old UXO with U.S. markings on it.

One of them "turned to us and said, 'Hey, do you want your bomb back?'"

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"Bombhunters"

Where: KOPB (10)

When: 10 p.m. Tuesday, part of the Oregon Lens series

For more information:

www.bombhunters.com