The Journalism School
Case Consortium @ Columbia
Columbia University

CSJ-13-0048.0

Higher Truth or Just the Facts? *Hell and Back Again*

On July 2, 2009, after years of covering combat in Afghanistan, embedded freelance photojournalist Danfung Dennis found himself in an intense firefight between US Marines and the Taliban deep behind enemy lines. Dennis videotaped the combat, and over the next four months pondered what to do with the extraordinary footage. Then on November 17, he attended the homecoming of the same Marine unit—and decided to produce a documentary on war, injury and returning home.

As protagonist of his story, Dennis chose Sgt. Nathan Harris, who in the heat of battle had handed a thirsty Dennis his water bottle—the first gesture in what would become a strong friendship. Harris had been severely wounded in early November and sent home. Dennis spent the nine months from November 2009 to July 2010 documenting Harris' recovery and reintegration into life in North Carolina.

Dennis was a well regarded photojournalist, but had no training as a filmmaker. He had chosen to add video to his portfolio because he felt that still images of war were losing their impact. The PBS documentary show *Frontline* had used some of his footage in a 2009 film. But Dennis wanted to make his own documentary, under his editorial control. He wanted to avoid glorifying combat, but instead provide an immersive experience that conveyed the emotional reality of war.

Dennis teamed up with documentary film editor Fiona Otway. Their goal was ambitious: use video to portray a highly subjective experience, but without narration, captions or other overtly expository techniques. They had two distinct sets of footage to work with: combat in Afghanistan and Harris in North Carolina. They decided on a flashback structure to integrate the two. They were willing to use cinematic techniques, but wanted to avoid anything that looked gimmicky or contrived.

This case was written by Eric Smalley for the Case Consortium @ Columbia. Professor June Cross of the Graduate School of Journalism was the faculty sponsor. (0113)

After considerable experimentation, they were able to establish flashbacks by, for example, starting combat audio before transitioning from a North Carolina scene; or using slow motion at the end of a North Carolina scene before transitioning to a combat scene. They also wrestled with showing the mangled body of a dead Afghan National Army soldier. Dennis wanted to expose the brutal reality of war, but the filmmakers did not intend to overwhelm viewers.

As the documentary came together, Dennis and Otway were largely satisfied. But when they screened it in September 2010, to their dismay Harris came across as unsympathetic. They realized that they had not conveyed sufficiently that Harris was in severe pain and heavily medicated during his recovery, which accounted for his sometimes erratic behavior. But without a voiceover or commentator, how could they make Harris' state clear to viewers?

They looked at footage of a pain specialist discussing with Harris the likelihood he would become addicted, but the scene was flat and overly expository. One cinematic technique that might fix it was to periodically fade the audio while the doctor was speaking, making it seem that Harris was dazed and uncomprehending. But they felt uncomfortable with that option. They had no idea whether Harris had been dazed in that moment. A documentary's credibility rested in large part on its creators' implicit guarantee that viewers were watching a true story. Using Hollywood production tricks to imply a character's experience could undercut that credibility.

Otway and Dennis had to wrap the film by September 24. They debated at length how to convey Harris' emotional, psychological and physical state. Should they use the fading technique? Might something else work as well, without requiring as much compromise? Or were they holding themselves to an unrealistic standard?

Documentaries

Documentaries occupied a nebulous zone between art and journalism. They strove to impart an overall truth by documenting real events. But they had to assemble sound and moving images into a coherent story, a process that necessarily introduced creativity. As a form of filmmaking, the documentary traced its roots to the late 19th century and the first motion pictures. From the start, documentary filmmakers used creative—and sometimes deceptive—techniques. Robert Flaherty, who made the first popular feature-length documentary *Nanook of the North* (1922), frequently staged scenes for his films—in part because his heavy equipment precluded capturing spontaneous events. "Sometimes you have to lie to tell the truth," he said.[1]

[1] *Reel Life Stories*, University of California, Berkeley. See: http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/reellife/quotes.html

Reputable documentary filmmakers considered themselves responsible in three areas: to the subject, to the viewer, and to an artistic vision. It was frequently difficult to reconcile the three.[2] For example, telling a clear, understandable story sometimes meant leaving out important contextual details. Choices made to produce a coherent narrative could give viewers a false impression of the passage of time, or of the sequence of events.

One survey of independent documentary filmmakers found that many justified such choices by appealing to a "higher truth." The report noted that "narrative structure sometimes mandates manipulation, which [documentary filmmakers] often but not always found uncomfortable... The process of film editing—collapsing actual time into screen time while shaping a film story—involves choices that filmmakers often consider in ethical terms."[3] To be sure, plenty of documentaries resembled fictional films. In an effort to make vivid a period in history, for example, they might use cinematic techniques such as non-original audio, elaborate transitions between scenes, and slow motion. Some used actors to recreate actual events.

Those who produced so-called news documentaries, however, considered themselves bound by the rules of journalism. They shied away from cinematic techniques, drawing instead on interviews and footage of actual events. The advent of lightweight digital cameras with good audio capability allowed filmmakers to capture and carry more footage. Nonetheless, war documentaries posed special challenges. Their subject matter was violence, death and extremes of moral behavior; the footage could be troubling to watch. The filmmaker had to walk a fine line between accuracy and prurience.

It could be difficult as well to maintain objectivity in war films. The US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq inspired numerous documentaries. Many of the filmmakers were embedded with US troops. The embed system was a formal relationship between the military and the media established for the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. It gave reporters access to the front line while affording them a measure of safety. But it also made it easier for the military to control what was reported. For example, a study of reporting from the Iraq war found that embedded reporters were much less likely to write about civilians or enemy combatants than their non-embedded colleagues.[4]

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2 *Honest Truths: Documentary Filmmakers on Ethical Challenges in Their Work*, Center for Social Media, School of Communication, American University. September 2009. See: http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/making-your-media-matter/documents/best-practices/honest-truths-documentary-filmmakers-ethical-chall

3 Ibid.

4 "Controlling the media in Iraq," *Contexts*, American Sociological Association, Spring 2008. See http://contexts.org/articles/spring-2008/controlling-the-media-in-iraq/

Dennis hoped to overcome the challenges of accuracy, objectivity and technology in order to tell a true story about soldiers on the frontlines of Afghanistan—even as an embedded journalist.

From Photojournalist to Filmmaker

Dennis had come to photojournalism during college. In 2002, the 20-year-old student was profoundly affected by James Nachtwey's book *Inferno,* a collection of war photographs that spanned several decades. "Those images from past wars—Bosnia, Rwanda, Vietnam—they were the reason I wanted to pursue photojournalism," Dennis explains. "I wanted to continue in this tradition of bearing witness to try to shake others from their indifference."

By 2006, Dennis was a photojournalist stringer for the *Associated Press* in Beijing. That summer, he bought his own body armor and moved to Afghanistan to work as a freelance photographer covering combat operations for the *New York Times* and *Newsweek*. Then in 2007, Dennis went to Iraq, where he accompanied military units in areas of intense fighting. His photographs were published in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, among others.[5]

Back in Afghanistan in 2008, Dennis found himself increasingly frustrated by still photography. "I felt that images were losing their impact, that society has been inundated with so many images that they no longer have the emotional resonance that they once did," he says.[6] In September 2008, Canon released the EOS 5D Mark II, a still camera that could also shoot high-resolution video. Priced at about $2,000, the camera was affordable to independent journalists like Dennis. He bought it even though the video features were rudimentary:

> This was a small, compact portable camera that I could use all my traditional lenses with and get this really high quality video image. But it was never intended for documentary film use or extended production, and so there were a huge number of technical drawbacks to using this camera.

Dennis modified the camera to overcome its limitations. The camera's principal shortcoming was relatively low-quality audio recording. Most filmmakers recorded audio separately, using professional equipment and a soundman. But this was not an option for a

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[5] Other outlets that published his work included *Time*, *Newsweek*, the *Guardian*, *Rolling Stone*, *Le Figaro Magazine*, *Financial Times Magazine*, *Mother Jones*, and *Der Spiegel*.

[6] Author's interviews with Danfung Dennis in Palo Alto, CA on October 10 and 11, 2012. All further quotes from Dennis, unless otherwise attributed, are from these interviews.

videographer on the run or under fire. Also, Dennis was determined to avoid the time-consuming process of syncing audio and video in post-production.

He scoured online technical forums for a solution, and while in the field with the military located software produced by the hacker community that he could download onto his camera. The software allowed him to record audio directly onto the camera at a higher quality than the factory software allowed. The only obstacle was downloading the relatively large file, given his remote location. He says:

> I remember being at an outpost in the Korengal Valley in eastern Afghanistan and just trying to download a 3-megabyte file, which was excruciatingly slow. As soon as it completed, I loaded the firmware up onto the camera and then went on the next patrol.

Over the next few months Dennis made further improvements, slowly converting the relatively light camera into a rig capable of shooting high-quality video in a combat zone. He perfected his sound set-up by commissioning a machine shop in England to produce a custom mount for the three microphones and audio mixer he used to capture sound.

But video quality was still jittery, an inescapable effect of a hand-held camera. Cinematic film and television productions used steadicams—cameras mounted on frames with counterweights that allowed handheld movement without the jitters. Dennis wanted that smooth cinematic look. So he acquired a Glidecam HD 2000, a small version of the steadicam. Unfortunately, even the small version of the steadicam more than doubled the weight of the camera to 15 pounds. Dennis was also carrying 25 pounds of body armor and 30 pounds of gear. He devised a system to take the weight off his arms when the camera wasn't in use:

> I attached [to] my body armor a rigging system in which I could mount the camera to my body armor, just simply to rest my arms during these very long combat patrols. But then when I would need to film, I would essentially unsheathe it and pull it off of this mounting system.

Even with the system in place, it took months to build up the strength to hold the steadicam for extended periods of time. "But as my arm got stronger and my ability got better using it, I could pull these long tracking shots," he remarks.

When Dennis arrived in Helmand Province in the summer of 2009 to embed with a company of Marines, he wasn't thinking about making a documentary film. He wasn't even sure what he would use the camera for. But he knew that he had a powerful tool and that he could use it.

Machine Gun Hill

On July 2, 2009, troops of the 2nd Battalion, 8th Marines infantry were deployed outside the village of Mian Poshtehin Helmand.[7] Dennis was embedded with Echo Company as they swooped in on massive Chinook transport helicopters. The assault was part of Operation Khanjar (Strike of the Sword), the beginning of President Barack Obama's "surge" in the Afghan war and the largest helicopter-borne offensive since the Vietnam War.[8]

The operation placed Echo Company deep inside Taliban-controlled territory. Within hours, the unit was surrounded and attacked. The Marines were defending a dusty rural village alongside a canal. Echo Company's assignment was to secure a key canal crossing. The fighting centered on a pile of rubble later dubbed Machine Gun Hill.

Dennis brought his newly honed video skills to bear during the battle. At the height of the firefight, he moved ahead of the unit's position and aimed his camera back at the Marines as they fired on the Taliban fighters. During the battle, Lance Cpl. Seth Sharp was severely wounded. Dennis filmed as a group of Marines hurriedly evacuated Sharp to a walled compound in the village and gave him first aid. Sharp died shortly after.

As a videographer, Dennis had decided to minimize his own presence and allow events to unfold around him. His inspiration came from *direct cinema* , a school of filmmaking that emerged in the US and Europe in the 1950s and 1960s. *Direct cinema* filmed unstaged, ordinary events. Dennis realized that he didn't need a narrator or other aspects of standard documentary filmmaking. He says:

> That really fit in with how I like to work: simply being an observer and blending into a situation and really making my presence as minimal as possible, to try to get closer to capturing something that would happen if I wasn't there. So, much of my effort was gauging the impact of my own presence on a scene and how much I would be changing it. And if I could feel that my presence was even slightly affecting how things were happening, I would adjust.

Dennis also looked to *direct cinema* when deciding what to shoot. He says:

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[7] *Order of Battle*, Coalition Combat Forces in Afghanistan, Institute for the Study of War, July 2009.

[8] "US Marines storm south in major Afghan offensive," *Agence France Presse*, July 1, 2009. See: http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gRwsjvq4rpcr2TF5di_NmwAPIlHA

> I wanted to just simply let the story unfold in front of me and then make decisions on where to follow the story and who to follow. But I didn't want to go in with any pre-set determined idea of what I wanted to tell an audience. I wanted to let the images simply speak for themselves. It is a belief in the power of the image, that the image comes first.

At the same time, he was willing to use cinematic equipment like the Glidecam and other techniques to achieve high-quality footage and broadly accessible visual narratives.

Frontline. In late July, as Dennis prepared to return to his home base in London, he met filmmaker and PBS *Frontline* Producer Martin Smith, who was beginning an embed stint. Smith was impressed with Dennis' camera setup, and Dennis showed him some of his footage. Smith was working on *Obama's War*, a documentary about the Afghan war. He and his co-producers chose Dennis' combat footage from Helmand Province to open the documentary. It was broadcast on PBS on October 13, 2009. "This was the immediate distribution of some of the footage, and this was important because this was a very timely news story and I wanted the footage to be seen," recalls Dennis.

The footage included the scene of the mortally wounded Cpl. Sharp. On his own initiative, Dennis had tracked down Sharp's father to seek his approval before it aired:

> His father didn't want to see the footage, but felt strongly that the rest of the country should, because that was the sacrifice that his son had made, and he felt that it was important that people see it. [The footage] did cause some controversy among the White House and the military community in general, but I felt it was very important that people see an uncensored version of what was happening on the ground.

Dennis was referring to the requirement that any film that included footage acquired thanks to official military access be vetted by a government public affairs office based in Los Angeles that had final say on what was released. Too often, he felt (though not in *Frontline's* case), the result was films that played like military recruitment commercials.

Studio or Independent?

Dennis' *Frontline* experience was rewarding—*Obama's War* was nominated for a 2010 Emmy. Dennis also won the 2010 Bayeux-Calvados Award for War Correspondents for his work on the *Frontline* program.[9] But he had a lot of footage still unused. Moreover, he was not entirely satisfied with *Obama's War*. It told a political story more than a combat story. For the first time, he

[9] Prix Bayeux-Calvados. See: http://www.prixbayeux.org/english/?p=57

thought about making a documentary of his own. He was not sure what the focus would be, but the subject would be the reality for US soldiers fighting in Afghanistan.

An early question was who to work with: a broadcast organization like *Frontline* that would help him make a film for television; or an independent production company that would work on a product for distribution in movie theaters? A broadcast partner was more likely to get the film made and in front of an audience—but it meant using a script. Dennis wanted to avoid that because that would have meant capturing footage to fit a preconceived storyline rather than recording events that unfolded around him. The independent option was riskier—a lower probability that Dennis would be able to complete the film or find an outlet for it if he did. But it promised Dennis editorial control.

For a while, it seemed as though the decision would be moot. In October 2009, *Frontline* Producer Marcela Gaviria approached Dennis to go back into Afghanistan. Dennis agreed and prepared to cover a new offensive centered on the town of Marjah in Helmand. "I was packed and pretty much about to go," he says. But the project was derailed: Dennis' request to be embedded was denied. Dennis was relieved. He remembers:

> Actually, it was a huge relief for me, because I knew at that point already that I didn't want to make a film for broadcast. That was not a structure or a medium that I wanted to adhere to. It was very distant from how I saw the story being told. I wanted something much more visceral, something that was from the perspective of being on the ground and not at a high level of interviews with generals.

So Dennis set about finding a partner to help raise funds for an independent documentary where he would be able to call the shots. He knew it would be a longer, riskier process. "But it was important for me to keep that control," he says. In November 2009, documentary director Richard Jobson connected Dennis with Michael Lerner and Martin Herring of London-based independent production company Roast Beef Productions. Dennis liked their work, particularly the documentary *Afghan Star* about contestants on a televised singing contest in Afghanistan. Roast Beef Productions was drawn to Dennis' cinematography and the power of his combat footage.

In mid-November, they signed a contract and Roast Beef Productions began the process of raising funds for a documentary. "That was a really frustrating process: very slow, time consuming, a lot of dead ends. It was a very difficult film to fund because of the subject matter," says Dennis.

Meanwhile, Dennis went to North Carolina where the Marines of Echo Company were rotating home to their base at Camp Lejeune four months after the offensive he had documented.

On November 17, he filmed the Marines' emotional reunion with their families. At that point, says Lerner, "the film was very much a work in progress."[10]

> We weren't really sure what direction it would ultimately take. Fundamentally it was a project made by someone who never really considered themselves to be a filmmaker, someone who wasn't really working to any kind of form or training or idea about what a film should be.

One Man's (Subjective) Experience

As Dennis watched the members of Echo Company step off the buses, he noticed that Nathan Harris, the sergeant who had given him water on the first day of the assault in Helmand, was missing. Dennis learned that Harris had been hit by machine-gun fire and badly wounded two weeks earlier. He tracked down Harris, who had just been released from a naval hospital in Norfolk, Virginia after multiple surgeries.

At their meeting, the decision about what direction to take the story became clear, says Dennis: tell Harris' story. He had gotten to know Harris in Afghanistan. The two men had shared a powerful experience—surviving a frontal attack—and trusted each other. Dennis was confident that focusing on Harris would be compelling. He says:

> I knew I had to follow him. I knew that this was the course that the story would go. That decision was very clear, but how it unfolded after that, and how it would combine with my existing footage and with that existing story, was much less clear.

The decision to follow one person took the film in a new direction. Instead of being about combat in Afghanistan from the perspective of soldiers on the front line, it became the story of one person's war, return and recovery. Dennis realized that the recovery process was integral to the experience of going to war, and that coming home could be just as difficult as combat itself if not harder. "You have relationships, you have bills. All of that can seem far more overwhelming than your daily combat patrols," says Dennis. "[It was this] very psychological experience of coming home from war, of coming from this world of life and death back to one where it seems like most people are just shopping." The disconnect could be profound.

Harris proved wonderfully cooperative. "He let me in in, I think, a way that he wouldn't have let anyone else in," says Dennis. He invited Dennis home to Yadkinville, North Carolina, and

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[10] Author's telephone interview with Michael Lerner on November 1, 2012. All further quotes from Lerner, unless otherwise attributed, are from these interviews.

introduced him to his wife, Ashley, his friends, and family by saying "this guy was out there with me." Recalls Dennis:

> With that, I was accepted into this rural Baptist community, and essentially lived with Nathan and Ashley during his recovery and transition back into a society that had very little understanding of what he'd been through.

Over the next nine months, Dennis traveled back and forth between London and North Carolina, staying at Harris' home for weeks at a time. He immersed himself in the lives of a couple in a small town and the experience of a badly wounded soldier struggling to recover and reintegrate himself into civilian life. Harris' life at that point was dominated by medical care, addictive painkillers and anger. It was a new type of filming experience for Dennis. Instead of combat, it was a couple's bickering. Instead of fields and villages in Afghanistan, it was a car in a fast food drive-through lane and a couple's bedroom as they lay sleeping.

Funding. By January 2010, Roast Beef Production was able to secure funding from several sources, including Britdoc Foundation, a documentary film funder associated with Britain's Channel 4, and Impact Partners, a New York-based investment fund that financed documentaries on social issues. This allowed Dennis to look for an experienced film editor. He knew he would need help to tease out a story, weave the right pieces of footage together, and craft a documentary.

Partners

Dennis admired the work of film editor Fiona Otway, particularly her contribution to the 2006 documentary *Iraq in Fragments* by filmmaker James Longley. *Fragments* documented civilian life in Iraq during the US occupation, anti-US insurgency and sectarian violence. Otway's pacing, tempo, attention to visual detail, and calm approach to storytelling appealed to Dennis. In February 2010, he contacted her, sent footage and they had a series of phone conversations. The two met on February 27, 2010 in London. They went through an hour-long assembly of the footage Dennis had shot. They discussed his narrative idea. After further discussions, Otway agreed to work with Dennis.

Otway zeroed in on the central challenge of the project: how to convey a highly subjective experience while trying to let the footage speak for itself. "We were trying to create a psychological portrait of war, and so that involved taking the audience into the main character's head," she

says.[11] Dennis wanted to present Harris' experience of going to war and coming home as viscerally as possible, to try to immerse the viewer in Harris' psyche.

It was a daunting task, but Dennis had a major advantage: in telling Nathan's story, he was also telling his own, similar, story. "My own subjective experience played a large part in how we told Nathan's story," he says. Dennis never asked Harris what he was feeling, and Harris saw very little of the footage. Instead, Dennis told Harris' story through the lens of his own experience. Dennis felt this would result in a more complete, truthful and transparent story. He explains:

> I wanted to try to combine these two worlds of the deserts of Afghanistan and the malls of North Carolina into one experience. Because that's how I had experienced it. You're dropped from one into the other, and it's extremely disorienting. And because those experiences in Afghanistan were so traumatic, you had these very intrusive memories that can come up at any point.

In fact, both men suffered from psychological trauma, though neither was formally diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Harris also had a traumatic brain injury caused by blood loss. Dennis immediately recognized Harris' psychological trauma, but it was quite a while before Dennis realized that he himself had a deep psychological injury. Dennis, who had been embedded with frontline combat troops for a total of 12 months, was going through the emotions and routines of his normal life, but inside a cocoon of numbness. He also had extreme nightmares. Eventually he recognized his own symptoms: emotional detachment, disorientation, a heightened sense of alertness, and the inability to turn that alertness off. He clarifies:

> In Afghanistan, you never feel safe. There's no front line. It's this 360-degree battle space and at no point can you really completely let your guard down. And so that continues on when you come home. Even the faintest of sounds that resemble an AK-47 or a mortar can instantly bring you into this heightened state.

Harris struggled with the daunting task of describing what he had been through to people who hadn't experienced it, says Dennis. Similarly, Dennis had difficulty describing his experiences, but the process of making the documentary proved helpful for him. Watching the footage brought up difficult memories, but reliving them in the safety of his home was therapeutic. It let him retrain his body so that he didn't have to be in survival mode all the time. "Just the process of talking through all of these experiences in the most intimate detail with Fiona was, in hindsight, a very therapeutic process," says Dennis.

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[11] Author's telephone interview with Fiona Otway on October 11, 2012. All further quotes from Otway, unless otherwise attributed, are from these interviews.

Editing Room

In June 2010, Dennis and Otway began to distill more than 100 hours of footage—some 70 hours from North Carolina and 30 hours from Afghanistan—into a 90-minute documentary. They had to find a story in the footage, determine the narrative arc, assemble scenes, craft transitions, and fine-tune scene lengths. As with most documentaries, time and money were tight. They had a budget for only four months of editing. In addition, they hoped to get the film into the annual Sundance Film Festival in January 2011. The deadline for submissions was September 24, 2010.

The first challenge was establishing that the story was about Harris. In combat, it was hard to distinguish one Marine from another, and there were no cues in the opening combat scenes to indicate that the story was about any one person. After multiple rounds of test screenings and re-edits, the filmmakers were having trouble getting the story started while adhering to their approach of letting the footage speak for itself with no narrative.

Dennis and Otway reluctantly resorted to using cards containing short texts that indicated that Harris led the platoon. This gave the audience the cue it needed, says Dennis.

> When Lance Corporal Sharp is killed and the story becomes about Sergeant Harris, we had to separate the two and provide clarification. And so we inserted these black cards that explained what was going on and introduced Nathan as the main character. It wasn't enough to just simply let the images and the audio play.

Dennis and Otway continually had to choose which path to follow and which stories to tell. At one point, for example, they considered expanding on Harris' experience with the Veterans Administration healthcare system and showing how Ashley's burden of caring for her husband was part of the civilian toll of the war. But they discarded those sub-stories for lack of time. "Because you are so limited by time, there are just entire threads that you have to discard," says Dennis.

One of the toughest decisions the filmmakers faced was how to integrate the footage from Afghanistan with that from North Carolina. From the beginning of the editing process, Dennis wanted to alternate between the two sets of footage rather than work chronologically. Otway wasn't sure they'd be able to pull off the flashback structure. "In the beginning the intercutting was painful to watch and it really wasn't working," she says. "So that was sort of a scary period to work through until it started to fall into place." In the end, they decided to craft a narrative from the North Carolina footage, shot largely in 2010, and intersperse scenes from the 2009 Afghanistan combat as flashbacks. "That was a very delicate process that we spent a lot of time on, the transitions between one world and the other," says Dennis.

Flashbacks. While the flashback structure offered a creative route to integrating two sets of footage, it was ethically tricky. Dennis and Otway didn't know what Harris was thinking or feeling in the scenes where they inserted footage from Afghanistan, yet the technique implied that the flashbacks were his experiences in those moments. As Otway recalls it, they discussed the notion of "documentary truth" and the idea of being true to the spirit of a story even if they weren't presenting a particular instance of footage in an accurate context.

Dennis and Otway realized that they would have to craft transitions by adding sounds and altering images—cinematic techniques that manipulated the reality of the footage. The challenge was to use only as much as necessary to make the flashback structure work. Go too far and the techniques came off as gimmicks or, worse, turned the scene into fiction. The filmmakers focused on the first two transitions from North Carolina to Afghanistan to ensure that the audience understood that the transitions were flashbacks and interpreted them as Harris' experience.

The first transition occurred when Harris was in a Wal-Mart department store looking at a combat-themed video game. Harris was staring up at a video screen off-camera. The shot was a close-up of Harris' face. The filmmakers slowed the footage, slightly diminished the colors and faded in audio from the Afghanistan combat footage. The effect implied that Harris' eyes had glazed over and his mental state was focused inward.

> We essentially are suggesting that now you're entering his thoughts and you're entering his memories, and his memories have been triggered by his looking at these video games and he's comparing it to his actual experience of war. So that's where we're starting to step into his mind.

It was possible that in that moment Harris was actually thinking only about the video game. In the context of the film, however, the moment became a key pivot point. It established the flashback structure and cued the audience to consider the inner experience of a wounded combat veteran who had recently returned home. The scene also encapsulated Dennis' message about how war was depicted. "We wanted that world of Wal-Mart, with all these false representations of war everywhere on sale and on the screens, to fade away," says Dennis. "Then his memories of those real experiences replace them."

Sounds. Sound was key to the transitions in the flashback scenes. Fading in combat sounds at the beginning of a flashback to a combat scene was a conventional film technique, and that allowed Dennis and Otway to take advantage of the viewer's expectations. Sound was also a key element of actual flashbacks, including those Dennis experienced.

> Even when you're in the safety of the US, you're transported in your mind back to these very difficult situations. Audio is often something that can bring you back much more quickly than anything else. A certain sound.

> The crack of a rifle or the hum of a helicopter. These things can instantly bring you back.

Dennis couldn't produce the effect he was looking for from the combat footage. "He was getting frustrated because he was trying to communicate what it felt like to have to go through these experiences," says Otway. So Dennis created subtle background sounds. "I think there was something really specific in his head that he was trying to recreate that just helped give the feeling of what it's like to be dealing with PTSD," she says.

Dennis worked with two sets of sounds, one metallic and warlike (helicopter blades and machine guns) and the other highly emotional human sounds (crying and cheering). He slowed these sounds to 2 or 4 percent of their original speed. "They would become these very low drones that were as close as I could come to trying to convey the emotional numbness and disorientation," says Dennis.

Shocking images. Filmmakers who documented war often wrestled with the problem of how much violence and bloodshed to show. Dennis and Otway were no exception. Countering sanitized and glorified representations of war with brutally honest ones was a major motivation for Dennis to make his film—the working title was *Battle for Hearts and Minds* (eventually, they would call it *Hell and Back Again*). Accurate portrayals of the consequences of war were also important for Dennis as a photojournalist.

One sequence of footage proved particularly troublesome. Dennis was on patrol with the Marines of Echo Company and several Afghan National Army soldiers when they came under fire. As they crouched behind a berm alongside a road, an improvised explosive device detonated a few feet behind Dennis. The explosion showered the Marines with dirt, and in the confusion it took them several moments to realize that one of the Afghan soldiers was missing. His body had been thrown 60 feet into the middle of a nearby field. Dennis went into the field with several Marines and Afghan soldiers and filmed them placing the mangled body on a stretcher.

In the initial drafts of the film, the filmmakers cut the scene before the graphic part. They were concerned about causing viewers to recoil. Was it effective to show a mutilated body at all? Did it turn a viewer's emotional receptors off completely? They also thought about the possibility of the dead soldier's family seeing the footage.

But Dennis felt it was important to convey an uncensored view of war and pushed to include the footage. Otway argued that the full scene went too far. "We definitely had several difficult conversations along the way about how much of the really graphic images we should use," she says. They ended up using the footage. Dennis acknowledged that the most graphic part of the scene crossed a line, but he felt it was justified.

> I wanted people to see what war really looks like, and not give them a sugarcoated version of it... I couldn't portray war without the reality of it. If I had made an entire film and didn't show the cost of war, it would be false.

Nobody Likes Nathan

It was September 2010. Dennis and Otway were in the home stretch. The film's emotional and narrative arcs were nearly complete. But when they screened their work in progress, a serious problem surfaced: many in the test audience found Harris's behavior strange and disturbing; he was not a sympathetic protagonist. He frequently played with loaded handguns when other people were in the room, kept a gun under his mattress for quick access at night, and at one point spun the chamber of a revolver and joked about playing Russian roulette. He also argued with his wife. Harris had a lot of weapons and he had a lot of anger issues, says Dennis. The feedback confirmed Dennis' fear that the film failed to show the depth of Harris' psychological trauma or explain that his injuries and medications caused at least some of his bad behavior. "It was unclear to some people that Nathan was on a lot of meds, and the meds explained some of his behavior that you see in the film," says Otway.

Yet without a sympathetic attitude toward the main character, audiences were likely to miss the point of the film. Part of the problem was that in winnowing footage and homing in on the main story, the filmmakers had cut material on Harris' medication. "There just wasn't a full story there," says Dennis. They had tried to convey his pain and addiction to painkillers with a few scenes—a giant bag of pills, poignant arguments between Harris and his wife about his medications. But it wasn't enough. Clarifies Dennis:

> My initial reaction to the rough assemblies of the footage was that it was not going to be clear to the audience how heavily medicated Nathan actually was. He was prescribed the synthetic version of heroin in very high doses. I could see how powerful and addictive these drugs were and the immense psychological impact they were having on Nathan, but I felt I was not truly conveying it.[12]

The filmmakers took another look at footage of Harris meeting with a pain specialist at a VA hospital. The physician explained to Harris the likelihood he would face addiction and build tolerance to his pain medications. But the scene was too expository, says Otway. "It's a scene that says 'Nathan has to go to the doctor and take meds.'"

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[12] Author's email exchange with Danfung Dennis on November 14, 2012.

They needed something with emotional impact. The filmmakers had been working with the film's sound as they neared the end of production, and Dennis turned to the low hums he had created. He experimented with fading out the doctor's voice in the hospital scene, and replaced it with the low hums. The effect: Harris seemed to be having difficulty staying focused and present in the moment. But Dennis didn't actually know whether Harris had had trouble concentrating at that instant. "It wasn't based on Nathan's internal view of what was happening," says Dennis. "I never spoke to him about that, I never asked him."

Using the scene with the altered audio raised a red flag for both Otway and Dennis. For one, the manipulation would be obvious to the audience. When the filmmakers earlier faded in combat sounds to establish the flashback structure, they had added audio. This change would go further: it would remove audio and impede the audience's ability to follow the dialogue. Viewers might question whether Harris was actually zoning in and out. "We're taking a very active role in how people are perceiving Nathan's experience at that point," says Dennis. The filmmakers had to choose: be true to their larger message, or maintain literal accuracy. Notes Otway:

> The sound is a cue that suggests that Nathan is having some kind of mental experience that Danfung and I as filmmakers really don't have any access to. We have to decide if it's appropriate to suggest that this is happening even though we don't know. Is it in the spirit of a larger story that we're trying to tell... or is it manipulative and abusing the trust that we develop with our audiences? We both felt that the choice to distort the sound in this particular scene would have a big impact on the 'truth contract' that the documentary has with the audience.[13]

Otway had strong reservations about using the altered audio and felt it would be too much of a compromise. "It would be an obvious and overt narrative construction in a film that had been largely shaped to erase the presence of the filmmakers working behind the scenes," she says. Dennis, meanwhile, was focused on trying to convey Harris' psychological state—and his own—and reasoned that the altered audio would be a way to close the gap between the effect on Harris of pain medications and the audience understanding of that effect.

The Sundance Film Festival's September 24 deadline was looming, and the filmmakers were still not sure audiences would connect with their main character. Should they include the scene with the manipulated audio and risk presenting a false version of Harris' experience? Or should they leave it out and risk having audiences tune out the tormented young man and the higher truth his story represented?

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[13] Author's email exchange with Fiona Otway on November 15, 2012.