

# Embedded

By Scott Rappaport

In the winter of 2004, UC Santa Cruz alumnus Ian Olds and a film colleague flew to the Middle East with the hope of shooting a behind-the-scenes documentary on the Iraq War. Two months later, they returned to the United States, armed with footage they would edit into an award-winning film that provides a rare glimpse into the days leading up to a violent insurrection in Falluja.



JIM MACKENZIE

Built around surprisingly candid interviews with soldiers from the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne squad, *Occupation: Dreamland* captures the soldiers as they struggle to adhere to the army's code of conduct—and simply survive—in an often ambiguous and always lethal environment. That the film was shot just before the city was nearly destroyed in one of the bloodiest battles of the war, makes the documentary even more compelling.

*Occupation: Dreamland* was released nationwide in 2005, screening in more than 20 cities to critical acclaim; it is still being shown in selected theaters today, as well as on the Sundance cable television channel, and a DVD was released in March. *New York Magazine* noted that the film “recalls Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*—except with real kids.”

Last spring, Olds and his codirector Garrett Scott were honored with a 2006 Independent Film Spirit Award in the “Truer than Fiction” category at a Santa Monica ceremony televised nationally the night before the Academy Awards. Presented annually to an “emerging director of nonfiction features,” the award comes with an unrestricted grant of \$25,000.

“The film is an attempt to break through the vast wall between the American public and the war in Iraq,” says Olds, who received a bachelor’s degree in film/video and anthropology from UC Santa Cruz in 1998. “It provides a hole in that wall, a look in to get a better sense of the war.”

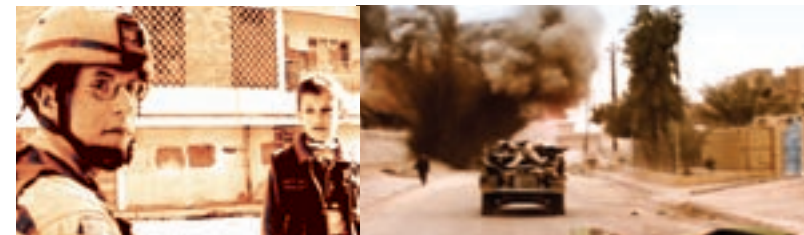
Olds’s motivation for undertaking the project was not only the U.S. invasion of Iraq, but the rapidly changing face of war coverage.

“To me, the world seemed like a different place—more so after the invasion than it did after September 11,” says Olds. “It seemed like a world with new kinds of wars and new sets of consequences. There was also unprecedented access because of the military’s embedding program. But the media was not taking advantage of it, and much of the reporting about the invasion was jingoistic and simplistic.”

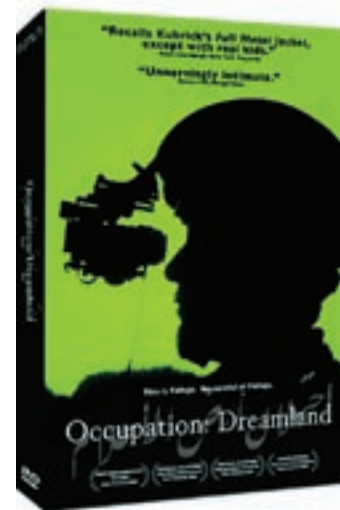
With only tape stock, body armor, and airplane tickets, the two filmmakers flew to Jordan and drove 10 hours to Baghdad, looking for contacts. “You couldn’t call from the U.S. to arrange embedding with the Army because we would just be denied,” explains Olds. “But it’s a strange phenomenon. Once you’re there, it’s kind of like you belong—why else would you be there?”

Olds and Scott eventually arranged

“The film is an attempt to break through the wall between the American public and the war in Iraq. It provides a hole in that wall, a look in to get a better sense of the war.” —Ian Olds



to join a three-day mission with the Alpha Company’s 2nd Platoon from the 82nd Airborne, after explaining to the battalion commander that they wanted to make a movie about a day in the life of



an American soldier. They ended up staying six weeks.

“It was strangely easy to get access to the soldiers,” recalls Olds. “There was no censorship—nobody ever looked at a single frame of our footage. They felt they had nothing to hide, and that the longer we stayed, the more accurately we would represent them. It’s changed now. That was only nine months after the invasion. There is much more control of information now by the military.”

At first, Olds and Scott just hung out with the eight squad members; but as the filmmakers spent more time living with the soldiers, the conversations became more intimate. “When you come back from a mission, all the walls are down because you have shared an intense experience—maybe a firefight or a bomb going off,” says Olds. “So they began to trust us. We also agreed from

the beginning there would be no voiceovers in the film, so it would all be in the soldiers’ own words. We thought that if we could just reflect the reality we saw without editorial-

izing, that would speak for itself.”

The filmmakers shot 130 hours of footage and Olds edited it down to a 79-minute documentary. Because they couldn’t get insurance in a war zone to rent gear, they purchased their own cameras. All the night vision footage was shot with a consumer camera—they borrowed night

vision goggles from the soldiers and secured them to the camera with pieces of wood and duct tape. Olds says they just kept shooting footage because it was usually too dangerous or hectic to review the tapes along the way.

“When I first got there, I was very frightened,” notes Olds. “My first day I was at the site of a car bomb; it was a very gruesome scene. Another day, a mortar landed 100 feet from me. I went over and saw how the shrapnel tore into the walls and it was terrifying to see the ‘kill radius’ of the shrapnel—that kind of haunted me.”

“But it was also scary how quickly we got used to it,” Olds adds. “There was this weird adrenaline. It was almost dangerous because it made you act reckless. So we would look at how the sol-

diers acted to see how scared we should be.”

Tragically, after surviving the Iraq experience, codirector Garrett Scott died unexpectedly of a heart attack, two days before the Independent Spirit Awards show in March. Olds reacted by taking half the money they were awarded at the ceremony and using it to create a grant in Scott’s name to support independent documentary filmmakers. Olds then returned to Columbia University to successfully complete his M.F.A. degree in film.

Olds is planning a trip to Afghanistan this fall to shoot a new documentary, and he is also working on a script for a feature film centered around a hotel for journalists in Iraq. But it’s clear that *Occupation: Dreamland* represents more than a turning point in his filmmaking career.

“I didn’t know what to expect when I went to Iraq,” reflects Olds. “I had never been in a war zone—I’d never even been to the Middle East. And when I got back, I felt an overwhelming sense of futility for both the soldiers and the Iraqi people. But I also had more respect for the soldiers as individuals. I had always thought of the military as a machine, but I was struck by the fact it was just a bunch of guys who were trying to figure it out as they go along.”



KEVIN WINTER/GETTY IMAGES

Actors Willem Dafoe and Lili Taylor present Ian Olds (left) with a 2006 Independent Film Spirit Award, which includes an unrestricted grant of \$25,000.