Embedded

By Scott Rappaport

In the winter of 2004, UC Santa Cruz alumnus Ian Olds and a film crew 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.

Built around surprisingly candid interviews with soldiers from the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne division, 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 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

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 editorializing, 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 soldiers 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.

“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.”