

INSIDE "E-TEAM"

'E-Team' is a documentary that's about four intrepid human rights investigators and we followed them as they did their work in the field where they're trying to document and investigate and expose human rights abuses, and we also followed them at home with their families in between their field missions. Ross and I chose to make this film about these four really interesting individuals and just amazing individuals, and their names are Anna, Ole, Peter and Fred. They are very different from each other and that was one of the main reasons that Ross and I were both drawn to them as a team and to the idea of making a movie about them, because we thought their varied personalities would be really interesting to see in a film and would offer different opportunities for the audience to identify with the characters. So for example Anna, or Anya as she's called, is Russian, very opinionated, very tough, I mean she's just an amazing person. She's married to Ole who is a much more kind of like patient, deliberate acting and speaking Norwegian. So they're a great husband-wife investigative team which is kind of a marketable thing in itself and then there's Fred who's a kind of like brainiac funny nice New Yorker and then there's Peter Boogaard who's a Belgian by birth but has lived all over the world and he is kinda tough and a little bit cranky and very interested in weapons, you know very interested in sort of the combat side of investigation. So they really have like, really get like a spectrum, like a whole different set of people who go into things.

What's interesting about the team aspect for us is we thought, you know, there'd be a lot of different reasons why viewers might be interested in this film. It's not like if you don't connect with Peter maybe you'll connect with Anya or maybe I'll go like, 'Now that Fred guy kinda reminds me of me' or something like that. So we thought that offered like multiple opportunities of entry for the viewer. The way Ross and I like to make movies is to have as much kind of intimate access as possible, so we didn't want to just make kind of a 'put these people on a pedestal' kind of movie where you just see them at work being valiant and you just think 'Oh my goodness, look at those amazing professionals.' I, we really wanted to see them as people who on some level reminded you of people you know or people like yourself maybe even, and so the way to do that in our view is to go behind the scenes and just

really get to know them as people, which means filming them at home and filming them when they're not on the job and filming them - in the case of Anya when she's putting on makeup or trying to figure out how to wear a burqa when she goes undercover in Syria, and it means filming Fred when he's in the park in Berlin with his son and getting up to see them in that kind of setting so you get a sense of that, you get a sense of them as people outside of their jobs. And I think that allows you to sort of believe in their work and understand their work more fully, once you see them outside work and that's just a kind of a philosophy of character-building that Ross and I share. Not everybody would make that same decision but that was our feeling.

In addition for us as filmmakers, when you spend that kind of intimate time with the subject you do get a different kind of feeling than in the film itself because you know, initially when we went to Paris and film with Anya and Ole they were a little bit stiff with us 'cause of course we had a camera in their house. I'm interacting with them cooking dinner and it's a little awkward, that's not a normal thing for people. But after doing that for months and months and years and years eventually it's just like 'oh yeah, that's Ross here with this camera again,' and it's kind of go about their business.

Over the course of making the film over many years we had an unusual experience where everybody had a baby. Ross had a baby, a year later I had a baby, all four of our E-Team characters, Anya, Fred Ole, Peter all had children in the making of this film. So there's just like a passel of toddlers running around all over the world who were all you know made over the course of this, this movie. I do think there's a subtext in the film about children, and parents and children, how they interact. There was one time I, we were talking to somebody who saw the film and they said 'I really feel like you get the sense like children everywhere,' like the E-Team themselves have children at home and then when they're in the field the people they're interacting with are talking about other children they lost tragically or - There's a scene we have in the film where one of their translators is talking about how his wife is pregnant and Anya and Ole connect with them about that, and he's so excited about the baby coming and that was an experience all of us had at some point in the making this film. So that is just one of those interesting like, behind the camera / in front of the camera things for us.

WORKING WITH HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

So with E-team in the making of this film we have a strong collaboration with the Human Rights Organization, Human Rights Watch. And Human Rights Watch gave Ross and myself very unusual access to their work and specifically to the work of these intrepid investigators, the Emergencies team and initially Ross and I were hesitant about making a film in close collaboration with a non profit organization, cause the last thing we wanted to spend our time doing was just kind of make a sort of puff piece about a non profit. And in fact even though Ross and I had no interest in doing that, we initially had a very hard time raising money for this film because when we describe it to funders they said 'Oh well I am sure Human Rights Watch is gong to want to control the message and you are just going to make a film that tells how great Human Rights Watch is and I have seen a lot of those films at the fund raising dinners so I don't know if we really need another one.' And Ross and I were taken aback because we thought, you know, we are independent directors and producers, we are not going to make a film that just talks about you know, 'Human Rights Watch is so great, yada yada yada.' That is not of interest to us as filmmakers to spend our time doing that and yet that was the perception, so we had to work against that quite a bit. Ross and I were very lucky in that Human Rights Watch had faith in us and they took what was really a great leap of faith on their part where they gave us - and they put this in writing - editorial control over the story we were filming so we had access to this amazing work that they where doing, which is very can be very rough at times, and they gave us access to that work and they said 'You have authorship over this piece of filming you are doing and we understand that it might not be everything we will say about our work, but go for it.'

As an American ever since we started these 9/11 wars back in 2001 there's been a problem with objectivity in conflict and I think that started with the early days of the US military embedding journalists - and that word 'embedding' came out of that time - they embedded journalist in with various military bodies, you know small military entities and the journalist will travel with them and really get to know the military closely and there has been a critique of that whole journalistic enterprise now saying, you know, those embedded journalists really can't be objective because they were too close to those particular you know guys in the military they were following. So I actually don't like the word 'embedded,' people say it now, say 'Oh your camera man was embedded with the people of Human Rights Watch people' and I don't think that. Frst of all that is too much of a military term and second of all it calls into question this whole kind of journalistic objectivity which is not

something that really applies to us. Of course when you are following subjects like the E-team into places like Libya and Syria and their homes you get close to them and you care about them and their work, that is for sure, so I don't think we ever say, you know, we were out to be objective. That is not something that we are striving for necessarily, objectivity. On the other hand we are trying to get at what seems to be true and of course truth is a many-sided thing and open to interpretation but it has to be something that seems true to us, so if we were to be in the field and we were to see something that looks staged or faked or manipulated, we are not going to try to make that look true if it doesn't look true to us. So we only included in the film things that to us feel like they brought up some truth or insight to a situation that is generally very complex and clouded by the fog of war and hard to interpret. So we are trying to bring clarity and insight, depth to something that is complicated to the best of our ability.

Ross and I didn't set out to make this film about Human Right Watch or even specifically about Human Rights so it wasn't like we got together and said 'Hey lets figure out the best way to raise awareness about human rights.' I mean that is kind of surprising cause I think that is what a lot of people think that is probably what we were doing. We were really drawn to the characters and thought that if we follow these character it's going to make a great movie. It is going to be really vivid, you are going to be very drawn in. And then as an added benefit the work they are doing is extraordinary and inspiring and can potentially combat these sort of cynical protective walls that we put up when we see horrible things on the daily news. We were not setting out with an agenda to try to raise awareness about human rights per se. Ross's and my agenda was strictly artistic, was to make a movie that people would want to watch and that comes - ok so there is a reason for that, which is there is a lot of documentaries out there that I think we feel are too agenda driven and when you watch the film you as a viewer feel, 'I can tell the filmmaker is trying to make me care about something or try to make me believe this agenda of the filmmaker' and we wanted to just strip the film of any of that and really just engage you with some amazing events, some amazing characters and kind of like along for the ride as you are in a fiction film. I don't want to downplay the social impact - documentaries have played a huge role in terms of social impact. I am just saying that the film is a film that is about story and characters and feelings, and emotions must come first and then the social impact comes out of the viewer being totally engaged by the film as a film. That is my opinion so those are the films that I like to see, those are the films that I think have the greatest impact - are the ones where impact is not, impact is subtext, social impact is subtext. The text of the film is 'I what to see what is going to happen next in this movie.'

It was a somewhat unusual circumstance in how Ross and I came to meet these characters. There was essentially a colleague of ours who introduced us to the E-team, who knew that Ross and I were interested in working on a project together and said 'Well there is this amazing group of people in Human Rights Watch and maybe they can make a good movie,' and Ross and I said, 'Well lets meet them and see.' So we were essentially brokered by a friend who thought Ross and I would be a good team to make a film about the E-team. I guess I would say, you know, Ross and I were not so excited to make a film about a non profit organization per se, but when we actually met the members of the E-team we thought 'These guys, they are like characters in a movie.' We had that feeling and when you have that feeling then that is a good instinct to go on in terms of making a movie.

SECURITY RISKS IN MAKING "E-TEAM"

In 'E-Team' in particular we had a somewhat unusual circumstance which is we were traveling with a group of people who already had serious security protocols. So Human Rights Watch has heavy security protocols that they go through before the E-Team can go anywhere. And we went together with the E-team, with their security protocols and with their assistance in those countries that help them get in. So that was a huge benefit; we weren't going in by ourselves, we're going in with people who had sort of a system for getting into the countries in the first place. When we first met with the team making this film we immediately had a logistical conversation about like how would that work, how would we bring a camera crew to follow the work of the E-Team which is so intimate and sensitive and somewhat dangerous in these countries overseas and they said you know there's probably going to be some places where a camera crew can't come but hopefully they'll be someplace where we can bring a camera crew and those are the times will bring you guys. And we said okay and this was maybe years before Arab Spring started and then we finally got funding in 2011, early 2011, and a couple months later Tunisia started and then Egypt and then later on we got a phone call saying 'You know what, we're going back into Libya. It's open - one area's opened by the rebels. We think maybe we can bring a camera.' And then they said 'But it has to be one person and you're gonna squeeze in the car with us.' And Ross is the camera man and I recorded sound.

We had another shoot in Libya later that year and Ross was unable to go and so we hired a freelancer who was working in the region named James Foley and he did

some shooting for us in Libya. He was later captured - a year later he was captured in Syria on another mission and we didn't know what happened to him and we were hoping that he'd be released and we were working with his family to try to raise awareness about his disappearance. And we were you know horrified to learn that over a year later he was eventually executed. But a very long time ago you know it back in 2011 he did some shooting for us that that ended up in the final film, some great footage in Libya.

Our producer Marilyn Ness was looking for somebody to travel to Syria with the E team and film and it's a, it's a big - this is a big ask of someone, to say 'I need you to go to Turkey, I need you to smuggle yourself across the border with these intrepid investigators' and so Marilyn called DP after DP after DP and pretty much they all said you know, 'my wife or my girlfriend says no, I can't go, it's too dangerous,' and so finally Marilyn got this 24-year-old woman who didn't have a wife or a girlfriend to say you can't go and she said, 'I'll go,' she said, 'but you gotta call my mom every day. Tell her I'm alive.' So Marilyn our producer's job was to get security to call from Syria every day saying Rachel's still OK, and she'd call Rachel's mom and say 'Rachel's still OK.' But Rachel's very talented, very brave and she and Anya both you know put on a burqa and smuggled themselves across the border, ran across the barbed wire like we feature in the film and Rachel filmed that while they were doing that and thanks to her we have that really remarkable footage we can use in the film that gives you a sense of how difficult it is to get into a place where it's not open to outsiders and foreigners who want to talk about what's going on.

It's certainly true that in recent years there has been a the lot of overlap between journalism and activism, between journalism and filmmaking, filmmaking and activism, there's just a lot of interplay going on especially in the overseas coverage and Human Rights Watch interestingly is sort of in the middle of that, like a lot of the research and documenting that Human Rights Watch does overseas is used in place of journalism because there are not journalists there anymore because so many international borders have closed down overseas. So a lot of people Human Rights Watch hires as researchers now are former journalists who are now - so they're doing the same kinda meticulous investigative work they did as journalists but then they're also attempting to put together that material in order to make a case to try to end the abuse that they're seeing happening. So it's twisted and adding an activist component to a simple investigative task that they were trained as journalists, so there's that element. And then there's people like us who are filmmakers first but there is a somewhat journalistic component. Some of our footage was used by the press, and there's a somewhat activist component in that

some of our footage in the film is being used to try to raise awareness about human rights, so there is that lead there too. There's a lot of instability in these countries and there's also a lot of people like Rachel Beth Anderson and James Foley who are two great cinematographers working overseas who are, you know – they're taking a lot of personal risks and hoping for great reward, hoping that they can make some great films and also hoping that they can make a difference.

The E-Team benefited from a lot of young people who were interested in – you know brave young people who want to make a difference, people like Rachel Beth Anderson and James Foley who did some filming for us in Syria and in Libya. And you know their work is amazing and their attitude towards it is amazing, like they just wanna keep going back and keep filming. They're just, they're into it and it's now their thing. They're like the new generation, you know, I think, I think every set of long-term conflicts creates a new generation. It is risky, I mean it's physically risky and you learn a lot really fast but you also have to have a certain kind of – it's not for everyone I would say. I mean I don't want to discourage people from doing it but I think it, you know, it can be, it can be very dangerous and it can be very hard apart from the danger to get your footage out into the world and have it be something meaningful, so. But for some people that's what they want to do and so if that's really what people want to do and if they feel like they're really connected to that region, or connected to that kind of work, then it's for them.

A TRUST EXERCISE

There is a point in E-team, where Carroll Bogert who is at Human Rights Watch is kind of describing how hard it is for members of the E-team to do this work and then walk away from it when they have to, and she says there is something about how, you know when you are in the field and you are talking to people who are reposing in you the sacred trust of their story and then you carry those stories with you, that is definitely the experience that the E-Team has and that certainly we all have as documentary filmmakers whenever we engage in somebody, trust and ask them to tell us their story and then say to them, 'Don't worry, we are not going to do wrong by you. We are going to do something with this story that is meaningful and that hopefully makes the world a better place,' and in some cases like in Human Rights Watch helps that person who gave their story, but you don't know. It is a trust exercise to share your story with someone and I think it is important for documentary filmmakers to know that when you are asking somebody to tell their story, you are asking them to trust you and therefore you need to hold up your end

of the bargain. That is great that you want to change the world and make an impact and stick with that feeling because people lose that feeling and if you can hang on to it you are going to have a more fulfilled life. That said, when you are trying to make a difference it is really important to listen to what other people say to you.

I will say that a common mistake not just for young filmmakers for everyone is that you think you know what the story is and you try to get people to give you their stories and use their stories to shape them to what you think the story is as the filmmaker. But I think you make a better film and a better service to your subject if you really listen to what they have to say and often what they have to say almost inevitably is slightly different to what you thought the situation is. And if you can then have the flexibility to shift your thinking about the story, the situation, the environment, the world based on the stories you heard and make your film more reflective of what you actually heard when you were listening, you do better work. That is my personal view. I mean I have many personal experiences where I thought, 'I want to make a documentary about this subject' and I think I know what the film is going to be about but then in the process of making the film you just discover, I discovered, I wasn't right about what I thought I was making a film about. It was actually about something else and I think the best documentaries are when you can pivot and say ok, acknowledge where your blank spots were and make it about this other thing that is appearing before you that is actually either more interesting, more truthful, more pressing, whatever it is - a better story. And that's where that flexibility and that humility is going to help you if you can really listen to it.