



THE ACADEMY
OF MOTION PICTURE ARTS AND SCIENCES

84th Academy Awards Nominee Questionnaire

Danfung Dennis / Nominated for: Best Documentary, “Hell and Back Again”

What is your hometown? Where did you go to school?

I grew up in Ithaca, New York. I studied Applied Economics at Cornell University, also in my hometown.

When did you decide that you wanted to make movies? What influenced you? Who or what inspired you along the way?

When I learned a photographer friend was killed in Libya, I was flooded by feelings of rage, sadness, helplessness and isolation. I thought of my other friends and colleagues that have lost their lives while doing their job. It all seemed utterly senseless.

Unless you have a personal connection, war is an abstraction. After nearly ten years since the initial invasion of Afghanistan, the daily bombings and ongoing violence has become mundane, almost ordinary. It is tempting to become indifferent to the horror and pain. It is much easier to look away from the victims. It is much easier to lead a life without rude interruptions from complex insurgencies in distant lands. But it is when we take this easier path, the suffering becomes of no consequence and therefore meaningless. The anguish becomes invisible, an abstraction. It is when society becomes numb to inhumanity; horror is allowed to spread in darkness.

Visual imagery can be a powerful medium for truth. The images of napalmed girls screaming by Nick Ut, the street execution of a Vietcong prisoner by Eddie Adams, the shell-shocked soldier by Don McCullin - these iconic images have burned into our collective consciousness as reminders of war's consequences.

But, this visual language is dying. The traditional outlets are collapsing. In the midst of this upheaval, we must invent a new language. I am attempting to combine the power of the still image with advanced technology to change the vernacular of photojournalism and filmmaking. Instead of opening a window to glimpse another world, I am attempting to bring the viewer into that world. I believe shared experiences will ultimately build a common humanity.

Through my film I hope to shake people from their indifference to war, and to bridge the disconnect between the realities on the ground and the public consciousness at home. By bearing witness and shedding light on another's pain and despair, I am trying to invoke our humanity and a response to act. Is it possible that war is an archaic and primitive human behavior that society is capable of advancing past? Is it possible that the combination of photojournalism, filmmaking and technology can plead for peace and contribute to this future? It is these possibilities that motivate me to risk life and limb.

What's the most valuable piece of advice you ever got in your career?

I'm inspired by the work of past war photographers. It was the tradition of witnessing and documenting important events so that others could understand the truth that moved me to first go to Afghanistan in 2006.

I still remember opening the book *Inferno* by James Nachtwey. These images of conflict seared into my consciousness. He was bearing witness, showing the mistakes we were making and reminding us not to repeat them. Shooting these inhumanities was a moral act on his part — images could impact people and change how they think. It is this tradition of bearing witness to the shake's others from their indifference that inspired the making of *Hell and Back Again*.

What was the biggest challenge you faced on the movie for which you are nominated?

I shot *Hell and Back Again* on a Canon 5D Mark II, a stills camera that was not intended to shoot feature films, especially in the dust and heat on the front lines. I had to build a custom camera system to use it in these extreme conditions.

Even then, there were major problems. The camera shut itself off every few minutes after overheating in the 130-degree heat of Afghanistan. There really wasn't any way around this, I only had one camera body, so I would just limit to only shooting at the most important times. It was frustrating when I could not film some of the most interesting moments as the camera would shut itself off - there was nothing I could do except let it cool.

Another challenge, of a completely different kind, was attaining the level of intimacy required shooting with Nathan and Ashley back at their home in North Carolina. I lived with Nathan and Ashley during his recovery and his transition back into a community that had very little idea of what he had just been through. I think that transition was almost more difficult than what happened on the battlefield. Because I had been on these offensives with Nathan, I already had his trust and respect, but it was more difficult with Ashley, and it took time for her to become comfortable with the camera and to trust my intentions to tell their story as truthfully and honestly as possible.

Do you use social media? If you tweet, what is your Twitter name?

@Danfung

@hellnbackagain

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www.facebook.com/HellandBackAgainTheMovie