

JumpCut

By George T. Marshall



"This year there are a handful of films that I want to cite simply because they embody, in one way or another, something of the spirit that gave birth to the Tribeca Film Festival... [Films] about people who know that what they do as individuals can make a difference in the world: "Beyond the Call." [is one of these films] - Peter Scarlet, Executive Director, Tribeca Film Festival

December 2007. In an Indiana Jones meets Mother Teresa adventure, three middle-aged men, former soldiers and modern-day knights, travel the world delivering life saving humanitarian aid directly into the hands of civilians and doctors in some of the most dangerous yet beautiful places on Earth, the front lines of war.

Ed Artis, Jim Laws and Walt Ratterman are self-styled Knights of Malta, and in 1995, they formed Knightsbridge International, a unique humanitarian aid organization, whose motto is "High Adventure and Service to Humanity." Artis explains: "We're not there to change anybody's politics, we're not in the God business, and we pay our own way." Their specialty is going where death from landmines, bullets, or bombs is as frequent as death from hunger, disease, and the elements. As Laws tells it simply, "We do what we can, when we can, because we can."



Their personal convictions and courage drive them to places such as Afghanistan, Albania, Chechnya, Cambodia, Burma, Thailand, Rwanda and the southern Philippines, often when few if any other humanitarian aid organizations are around. The camera follows Artis, Laws and Ratterman as they take us on a journey into the heart of humanity and the soul of courage.

The film that tells their story is "Beyond the Call" directed by Adrian Belic, Oscar nominated with his brother Roko for the critically acclaimed "Genghis Blues" in 2000.

SOME BACKSTORY

Born in America of Czechoslovakian and Yugoslavian parents, Adrian Belic grew up in Chicago, but spent many summers behind the "Iron Curtain" in Eastern Europe with family and friends. This unique cross-cultural upbringing sparked his curiosity about the way people view each other and the world around them. Listening late into the night to captivating stories from remarkable people both in the States and overseas drew him into the art of storytelling.



He began making films in elementary school with his childhood friend Christopher Nolan (a future writer/director) and his brother Roko Belic. During their second year of filmmaking (at the age of eight) "Star Wars" (1977) exploded on the film scene and their once-quaint films grew into 3-

minute Super 8 "epics" with ping-pong tables shrouded in cooking flour for planetary stop-action battles, continuing to live-action scenes in the snow-covered backyards of Chicago, all punctuated with fireworks and film frames scratched by hand for "laser" effects. The power of storytelling through motion pictures and sound captivated him.

Adrian graduated from University of Southern California (USC) in 1993 with a BS degree in Political Science and a minor in International Relations.

Adrian traveled around the world and across America throughout his college and post college years. He worked with various producers, co-producing, shooting video and film, recording sound, and story development. He served as the director of an environmental information center in Los Angeles for a year before a childhood fascination with a little known country in Southern Siberia called Tuva resurfaced.

MOTIVATIONS, GOALS AND A VISION

Adrian Belic is a busy and driven individual. When I caught up with him recently, he told me that he had only just returned "from over three months traveling on four continents, seven countries: Thailand for the Bangkok International Film Festival, Laos to scout a new documentary, the Philippines for the Manila International Film Festival, Hong Kong to see a friend, Croatia for a bit of a vacation, Brazil for the Rio de Janeiro International Film Festival, and the US including San Francisco to do laundry, LA for 17 hours to jury the Elevate Film Festival, and NYC for Fashion Week, then three more film festivals in four days (Bend, OR. Mt. Shasta, CA. New Orleans, LA)."

In all, his film screened at over 80 film festivals on five continents and won 25 awards. The word "impressive" would be an understatement.

What motivates this director and where does he get his drive? These were things I wanted to know and Adrian was more than willing to share.

Here's how our conversation went.

GTM: Tell us a bit about yourself; your academic and professional background. Just who is Adrian Belic?

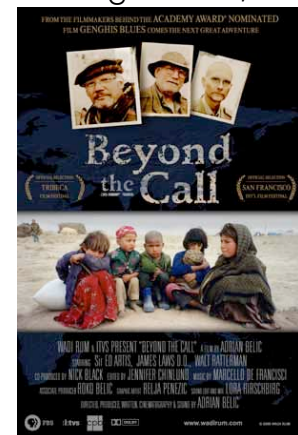
Adrian Belic: I made my first film when I was in third grade with my friend Christopher Nolan (Director: "Memento," "Batman Begins," "The Prestige"). I went to the University of Southern California. I planned to study Filmmaking and Entrepreneur Business. But with making my first film at eight years of age and having my first business at 11 years old (used BMX bicycle sales), I majored in Political Science and International Relations. After college, I traveled around the world and worked with various production companies. When my brother Roko got out of college at UC Santa Barbara we formed Wadi Rum Productions and embarked on our first production, the documentary feature "Genghis Blues" (www.genghisblues.com). We were fortunate to win the Sundance Audience Award and were honored with an Academy Award nomination. "Beyond the Call" is the second film.

GTM: Why did you decide to produce a documentary on three American men who by their own description are modern knights? Where did "Beyond the Call" come from?

Adrian Belic: I met Ed Artis, one of the main three characters, at a screening of "Genghis Blues" at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival. He watched the film and heard the Q&A my brother and I gave. He came up to me, and making a long story short, told me about what he and his friends do. I took one look at him and frankly thought he was lying. The next day his buddy and one of the other characters, Jim Laws called me up and with his Houston twang accent, told me the same stories. I thought if half of what these guys are saying is true, this is the next film. I told them that the next time they go to call me; I want to go. They did and I went.

GTM: Was there something about their lives that you found a source of inspiration?

Adrian Belic: I make character driven films and these guys are amazing characters. Here are three guys in the latter stages of their lives, when many people begin to slow down. Here are three beer drinking, pissin', cussin' rough around the edges older ex-military guys that doing things my Berkeley liberal, younger friends wish they had the guts to do. Now that is a very interesting combination. As the characters often say, they are knights not saints. These guys are the real McCoy, doing things that many of us only dream of doing. At a minimum I want to hang around these kinds of people living their calling. And I thought that others might like to go along on the adventures as well, so I made a film.



GTM: How did you go about deciding how you wanted to shoot this documentary and what footage you needed to obtain?

Adrian Belic: I shot as it came. There was very little time to think when we were in the field. It was go, go, go and try not to die. I met Ed Artis in Los Angeles once before my first trip with the guys for an interview to get a sense of what these guys are all about. Jim and Walt I met flying across the Pacific Ocean.

Some people say they shoot from the hip; I shoot from the gut, heart and mind. As the Knightsbridge guys do before they embark on their missions, I too do as much research as I can about my subjects, what they do and where we are going. Once in the field I try very hard to be in the moment, feeling my way through the shoot. Referencing my research, but more importantly being very present to sense what is happening and how best to capture it. I am always recalculating and adding to my knowledge base as I am shooting to be as responsive and true to what is happening. Though I am as prepared as possible, my guiding force is the moment and my ability to adjust to get what is needed not just to tell the audience or show them what when on, but hopefully for the audience to feel what it is to be there, in the mix. Then it is in the editing that the brilliant editor, Jennifer Chinlund, and I crafted the story for the audience to experience the adventure.

GTM: Tell your timeline in the evolution of this work.



Adrian Belic: The film took five years to make so I will only give a rough outline so not to belabor the point that documentaries are not easy to make.

I met Ed Artis in early 1999. I went on my first trip with the guys in mid 2000. I continued to travel and film them through 2002. I barely raised a few thousand dollars while shooting the film, funding the vast majority of the filming with my credit cards. I begged all the way through 2003 and part of 2004 trying to fund the editing of the film. But it was very hard to find substantial funding in the US for a film about Americans helping “the enemy” Muslims. So I went to Europe to look for funding, but by 2003 Europe had enough of Americans traveling the world trying to “help” people. Finally in late 2004 PBS, whom I had been begging for money from for nearly half a decade for this film and getting rejected every time, finally decided that this is a very important film and gave me the money to finish the film. Jennifer Chinlund and I edited for nearly a year. The film had its world premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York City. We have since screened on five continents winning 25 awards.

GTM: What was it like shooting in areas that were so remote and at the very least, dangerous?

Adrian Belic: To say that it was a challenge would be an understatement. I was the only crew in the field. So I had to do everything making the film on the road. Filmmaking is my passion and when you are following your passion, the difficulties don't seem as big when you are in the zone. Now sitting at home and telling the stories, the challenges were great, but the excitement was greater.

Yes, there was danger of dying from a number of things as any moment, automatic weapons, landmines, windy mountain roads with thousand foot drops and no guard rails, landmines, bandits, government troops, US bombs, diseases, etc. But, basically, I trusted the three guys, Ed Arts, Jim Laws and Walt Ratterman and they trusted me. We each had strengths to bring to the group and good sense of humor when things were not going the way we wanted.

In terms of the actually shooting, Walt Ratterman had portable solar panels and inverter. We would buy a car battery wherever we were. The solar panels would charge the car battery by day and we would tap the car battery at night for our electronics, including my camera batteries. I designed a combination of equipment in my vest and small backpack that could keep me away from power for three days. That was about as much food as I had packed in my kit as well.



When you are in areas and situations like making "*Beyond the Call*" put me in, you better trust those around you and yourself; and a sense of humor is a big plus.

GTM: How did the events of 9/11 impact (if at all) on your shoot in Afghanistan and subsequent missions?

Adrian Belic: The only real impact that 9/11 had was in the aftermath with the US reaction, it made it more difficult for people around the world to trust let alone like Americans. Where before 9/11 when we traveled, people gave us the benefit of the doubt that we were there to do well, that clearly changed as the Bush Administration began prosecuting the war, especially with officials. But on the ground, away from the politics, the people that the Knightsbridge guys help did not care for a second what color their skin was, what was their religion or the flag on their shoulder. They were simply grateful that someone was there to help

them with no agenda to change their religion, their politics or to make a buck off their suffering.

GTM: How was this production funded?

Adrian Belic: I funded the first few years of shooting mainly through credit cards. Then I received a thousand bucks a few hundred there to continue the shooting. Finally PBS came aboard to pay for the editing. And I guess you can say the rest is history.

GTM: What equipment did you use for this shoot?

Adrian Belic: I shot with a Sony PD-150 mini digital video camera. I had one wireless microphone and one directional microphone. I used natural light and a reflector.

GTM: Do you think that digital filmmaking has influenced and shaped the documentary film?

Adrian Belic: I could not have made "*Beyond the Call*" the way I did with out digital filmmaking. Making the film solo in the field and with very limited funding, digital was the only way to go.

GTM: What has it been like touring the Festival circuit? Can you tell us about some of your experiences?

Adrian Belic: It has been an amazing ride traveling with the film. I have crisscrossed the US and traveled around the world with the film. I love showing my films hearing the reaction from the audiences. I been very happy to see the broad cross-section of society that come to see the film everywhere it screens. We have senior citizens and students come, military people and hippies, liberals and conservatives, and a broad section of average people and families. I love and I think the audience also enjoys hearing how the film touches different people because of their individual life experiences. It is a lot of fun traveling with "*Beyond the Call*."

GTM: You were nominated for an Academy Award for your last production, "Genghis Blues" What was that experience like and did it open doors for you professionally. Did it have a lasting impact?

Adrian Belic: It was a pretty mind blowing experience being nominated for our first film. It is hard to describe, there was so much that went into that experience, from being notified of the nomination while my brother Roko and I were in Mongolia screening the film to walking down the red carpet with our Mom and many of those that were instrumental in making "*Genghis Blues*" a reality. Apparently our time on the red carpet is still in the top ten best red carpet moments on TV.

Yes, the nomination did open doors in the industry. We had meeting with many influential people. In terms of lasting impact, I remember a film industry friend telling me during an Academy Award after party that my brother and I will always be Academy Award nominated filmmakers. Now a few years after the big event, I realize much to my surprise that it is true. We are often introduced as Academy Award nominated filmmakers and it continues to open doors.

GTM: If you were to do this shot over again, what would you do differently?

Adrian Belic: Not much. I really can't see doing it very differently. Sure it would have been nice to have more money up front. I tried to do that and it did not work. I focused on what I could do when I needed to and that was jump on planes when the guys said jump and make the film. I did the best I could and I am happy with the outcome.

GTM: What would you like to see happen to this work?

Adrian Belic: I would like to see "*Beyond the Call*" go out into the world and touch people with many different backgrounds. I would like to see it screen in schools and universities, screen in living rooms with groups of people so that they can be inspired by the film and have discussions and take action to be a more engaged member of their community and the world at large. I would love to see the film screen at military bases, US and other countries', to inspire more soldiers that killing is not the only way to win.

GTM: Has this documentary inspired you to do another project? If so what would that be?

Adrian Belic: I have a number of new projects in the works. I was recently in Laos scouting a documentary I want to make there. There are films in Burma, Laos, Venezuela, and Cuba that I am looking into. One exciting development is that Ed Artis' literary agent and my agent are trying to turn "*Beyond the Call*" into a, based on a true story, narrative film. So there is always something going on.

GTM: What would you tell a film student at a college about approaching a career path in the discipline of documentary film production?

Adrian Belic: You better love it and be committed to it. If you are not why should anyone else be you are trying to get to work with you. You better be willing to be the first one up and the last one standing. This goes for someone who wants to be a director or in any other aspect of filmmaking. This goes for life.

GTM: Anything else you'd like to add?

Adrian Belic: Adrian Belic: I thank you and your readers for your interest in "*Beyond the Call*" and time. People often thank me for doing what I do and making the sacrifices. They say I am so generous. I say I am actually very selfish. I do what I do following my passion in hopes of inspiring people to follow their

passion and then I can enjoy the fruits of their passion. What goes around comes around, my Mom and Dad were right.

- To learn more about the film, go to www.beyondthecallthemovie.com; or visit the My Space page at www.myspace.com/beyondthecall
- To learn more about the humanitarian work of Knightsbridge International, visit <http://onedollar4darfur.com>.
- "Beyond the Call" will air on National PBS January 26, 2007 at 10:30PM and January 27, 2007 at 11:00pm. Please check your local listings.

About the Author:

George T. Marshall is the Producing Director of the Rhode Island-based Flickers Arts Collaborative, the creators of the annual Rhode Island International Film Festival for which he also serves as Executive Director. He teaches documentary film and speech communications at Roger Williams University. He is a director, writer, producer of commercials and industrials for numerous business clients in the region. Currently he is writing a chapter on teaching digital documentary filmmaking for a new college text book entitled: "Teaching with Multimedia: Pedagogy in the Blog/Websphere." He can be reached at <flicksart@aol.com>