

Dispatches from the front line

Sylvia Vetta meets award-winning video journalist Zoe Broughton

Zoe Broughton is a video journalist who has spent more than 20 years filming campaigns and putting herself on the front line. Zoe's passion for social action has taken her into difficult places where she needed all her courage.

Zoe was born in 1970 in Louth in Lincolnshire. Her mother, Jenny, is an animal lover and has passed that love on to her daughter. Her father David Broughton was a group captain in the RAF and like most families in the forces they expected to move around the country.

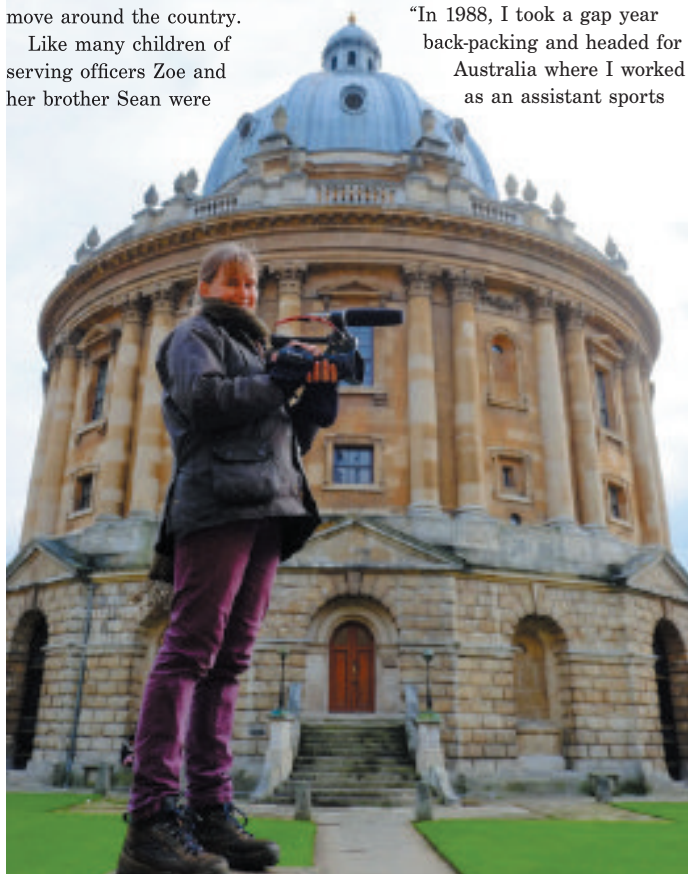
Like many children of serving officers Zoe and her brother Sean were

sent to boarding school. Zoe said: "One boarding house overlooked Ely Cathedral. I liked the school subjects like sport which got me outdoors. The school had a scheme similar to the Duke of Edinburgh's award. I learned how to pitch a tent, to orienteer and to race across rivers balancing on ropes. I loved all that. It was training that has come in useful."

Zoe's A-levels were in biology, English and economics, but her passion for filming and taking photos was well established before she left school. Along with her survival training that passion was to inform her career.

"In 1988, I took a gap year back-packing and headed for Australia where I worked as an assistant sports

"We worked with Hi8 tapes, edited on a massive and expensive computer and made about 1,000 VHS copies to distribute. In contrast, nowadays I can film on my iPhone and upload clips almost instantly to the web."



instructor in a girls' boarding school. Once I had earned enough money, I came slowly home via New Zealand and Hawaii."

She took up her college place in media studies, computer programming and information technology at the City of London Polytechnic and embarked on an unusual summer job in 1992.

"I began selling juggling equipment for a company called More Balls than Most. I ran stalls in Covent Garden, Camden Market and at festivals. I was asked to take part in a show at a Green Screen event. It was there that I saw Becca Lush and Emma Must speak passionately about their involvement in the Twyford Down road protest.

"I also met two film makers who were making films for NGOs. Thomas Harding and Jamie Hartzell had become disillusioned with video journalism. After graduating I joined them, along with Paul O'Connor, and set up *Undercurrents*, the first video magazine of the direct action movement. This was long before you could put a film on YouTube.

"We worked with Hi8 tapes, edited on a massive and expensive computer and made about 1,000 VHS copies to distribute. In contrast, nowadays I can film on my iPhone and upload clips almost instantly to the web. *Undercurrents* was dubbed 'the news you don't see on the news'," Zoe said.

Zoe in thoughtful mode on a visit to the Gower

*Photographs:
Hugh Warwick*



“When M11 campaigners were evicted from houses which became known as Wonstonia in Cambridge Park, Wanstead, I was barricaded into a room with two other women – Patsy who had lived in the house for 14 years and Becca Lush, who now works for the charity arm of the cosmetics company Lush funding social activism.

“The women locked their arms into pipes which were encased in concrete to make it hard to drag them away. After 17 hours we heard the bailiffs getting closer, using a drill to get through the wall to us. The women shouted to them to be careful as the room filled with dust. I kept changing the tape and hiding it in my socks

and knickers,” Zoe recalled.

“On the other side of the road the mainstream press was penned in and not allowed to get near the protest site. Once I was freed I approached the ITN crew, rescued my film from my socks and negotiated the sale of my footage.”

Undercurrents was partly funded by a company called Small World Productions. One day they called Zoe to a meeting, swore her to secrecy and explained that they had secured a Channel 4 commission.

Zoe explained: “They asked if I would go undercover into Huntingdon Life Sciences, Europe’s largest animal testing company,

Continued on page 11



Zoe at work at the recent climate change march in London

Photograph: Ted Dewan



From page 9

to see if the research they had been given, suggesting cruelty and malpractice, could be backed up with evidence.

“The first step was to get a job – I answered an advertisement for a lab assistant in the local paper, was interviewed and got it. For the first two weeks I could not film covertly because you have to prove it is in the public interest.

“On the basis of that we applied to ITC (now called OFCOM) for a license to film. It was granted and I was wired up with a camera built into a pen, but this was back in 1996 and the covert equipment was not as small as it would be nowadays.

“At first I was excited but it quickly became emotionally exhausting as I worked with beagle puppies and grew to love them. During stressful test days, puppies were shouted at, shaken and hit. The images I filmed still have the power to shock.”

Zoe recorded damning evidence of unscientific shortcuts. She filmed staff fiddling drug doses, estimating measurements and recording results incorrectly.

“The company was asked to reply to the allegations of animal cruelty,” Zoe recalled. “It was their word against mine – except they did not know that I had filmed everything. The edited film was screened on Channel 4 on March 29, 1997. The police arrested two of the lab technicians. The company’s license was revoked until they



met conditions demanded by the Home Office and its share price fell from 126p to 54p.”

Zoe’s film won The British Environmental Media Award Scoop of the Year and the International Brigitte Bardot Genesis award, which she received in Hollywood.

After finishing this assignment Zoe wanted a quiet retreat and bought a houseboat moored near Donnington Bridge in Oxford – and named it *Beagle IV*.

Zoe’s next commission came from Compassion in World Farming. She went to work as an egg packer at battery hen farms, including one near Oxford.

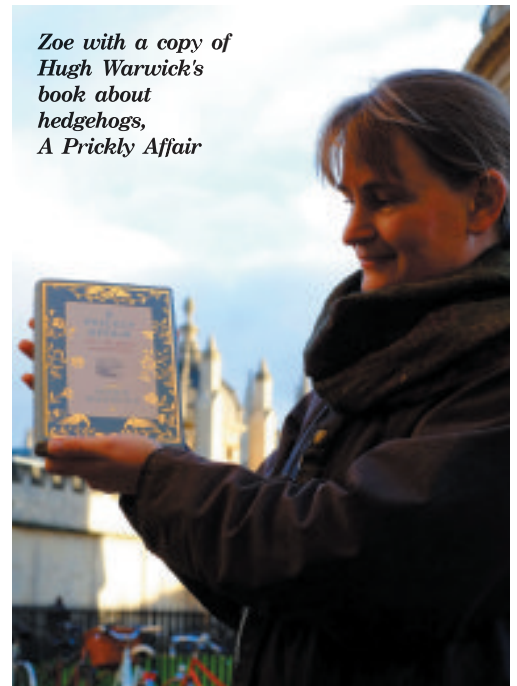
She said: “I gathered footage of five hens crammed in one cage unable to spread their wings. My video was sent to all MEPs and they voted in favour of the gradual discontinuation of that method.

“I rescued five hens and put the cardboard box I carried them in gently on its side in my garden. Their leg muscles were weak and they had few feathers. Watching them slowly make their way out of the box, over an hour or more, was gripping. And within five weeks their feathers grew back and they behaved like normal hens in a natural environment.”

While filming on other assignments for Compassion in World Farming, Zoe’s car was stoned by abattoir workers and she was ordered out of a car at gun point by police in Italy. She claims she is not brave but courage is when you feel fear but don’t succumb to it.

Continued on page 13

Zoe with a copy of Hugh Warwick’s book about hedgehogs, *A Prickly Affair*





From page 11

She needed all her courage when she went to film in Burma. The initial project was to visit refugee camps in Thailand in search of witnesses to the 1988 uprising in which thousands of unarmed students were murdered by the Burmese military.

Zoe has taken a course in Hostile Regions Training for journalists. Some of those running the five-day course are ex-SAS officers.

Zoe showed me a possible castaway object, a tiny golden charm which came from a great aunt's bracelet. But I thought she could smuggle that into Oxtopia in a pocket.

Zoe is a mother of two delightful children, Matilda and Tristan Pip, so she no longer considers working in violent places. Her partner, the author and ecologist Hugh Warwick, is sometimes known as "Mr Hedgehog". His best known book is *The Prickly Affair*. Zoe showed me a particularly beautiful imprint of that book as a possible choice to take on the island.

They also made a film for the Quakers' Turning the Tide programme. Their film, called *Nonviolence for Change*, looks at nonviolence as a campaign strategy and with it Zoe won more awards. It has been translated into three languages and been seen all over the world.

Zoe has also worked with Greenpeace.

"I spent nights on top of a waste incinerator chimney, and in Scotland I filmed from the top of an oil rig. For this I was charged with 'Malicious Mischief' - which sounds more fun than it is meant to. So far each of my arrests has ended with the charges being dropped."

Social activism can raise awareness and help create change. But Zoe's work is often about

being a witness - recording the work of others so that it can reach a wider audience. For example, she helped save some amazing women from a long prison sentence, including her friend the Nobel Prize nominee Angie Zelter.

In January 1996, they slipped past security guards at British Aerospace near Warton, Lancashire, ran across a frosted runway to the hangar containing Hawk fighter jet number ZH 955 and forced open the door. Then, using household hammers, they smashed the £12m plane's sophisticated electronics. Their reason?

"The Hawk jet was to be sold to Indonesia and to be used against the people of East Timor in what was an internationally condemned occupation of extreme brutality. The women were held in custody for six months in Risley Remand Centre."

They explained how they had exhausted every other avenue to get the sale stopped. They argued that it was illegal to support a country conducting genocide. This was supported with the powerful scenes documented by Max Stahl of a massacre in East Timor."

In Zoe's film were planted the seeds of their defense, that their action was intended to stop the greater crime of genocide. John Pilger appeared as a witness at the trial in Liverpool and, when the "confession" film was shown, the jury found the four women not guilty.

Zoe bought a house in East Oxford and she and Hugh married in the Friends Meeting House in 2003, the year after she filmed in Burma.

Parenthood has clearly not slowed Zoe and in her spare time she loves to play the hectic sport of "Ultimate Frisbee" (if in

doubt as to what that is, look it up). And always there is the connection with those seeking to create a better world. She also shares her skills as a tutor at Film Oxford teaching how to make film and edit.

In 2013, of her friends from Greenpeace were arrested in the Arctic trying to spread the word about danger to the Arctic from Russian oil exploration. Philip Ball and Frank Hewetson were among the 30 activists held in Russian prison with a threat of a 15 year sentence hanging over them.

Zoe said: "I filmed Phil before he left for the protest. He told his family he could be away for a few weeks. Many weeks later, when it didn't look like they would be freed anytime soon, my family went on a vigil for them in Headington and met Phil's mum and brother."

It was time for Zoe to select her desert island item. She said: "I can't go without my camera and its memory card will have pictures of family friends and of Oxford. Pip is now a chorister, and it is a beautiful experience watching the choir sing in chapel. After moving out of the narrowboat into a house, I didn't lose my love of rivers. I share ownership of a canoe and that would be great on the island."

As her camera is often around her neck, I thought we could allow her to take her canoe as well.

• *With Rob Lemkin and Philip Hind (not involved for last few years) Zoe set up and runs Oxford's Open Screen, a film networking night which meets on the first Thursday of the month at 7.30pm. filmoxford.org/open-screen. Contact her if you need an event filmed. zoe@urchin.info @camerazoe.*

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