



FEATURE

## BLOOD ROAD

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A BEHIND-THE-SCENES LOOK AT ONE OF  
RED BULL MEDIA HOUSE'S MOST TRYING PRODUCTIONS.

WORDS *Chris Nelson* IMAGES *Josh Letchworth*

In 2015, ultra-endurance mountain biker Rebecca Rusch — “The Queen of Pain” — pedaled 1,200 miles along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a once-secret route used by the military to move troops and supplies during times of conflict. Accompanied by Vietnamese biking champion Huyen Nguyen, Rusch set off through Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, hoping to posthumously reconnect with her father, Stephen, a U.S. Air Force pilot, who crash-landed and died after being shot down during the Vietnam War when she was only three years old.

When Rusch approached Red Bull Media House about filming the project, the production team hesitated at first — the Ho Chi Minh Trail runs an indeterminate route through dense, primeval rainforests, and the video crew would need to continuously leapfrog Rusch and Nguyen, who would be hauling ass. Ultimately, the logistical challenges didn't deter director Nicholas Schrunk and his team, who shoved thousands of dollars of camera equipment into backpacks and rode a handful of old Honda enduros through the thicket to capture absolutely unreal footage. We sat down with Schrunk to discuss what it took to pull off such a monumental project and bring Blood Road to life.



**I&A:** What tipped your confidence to actually plunge into this project?

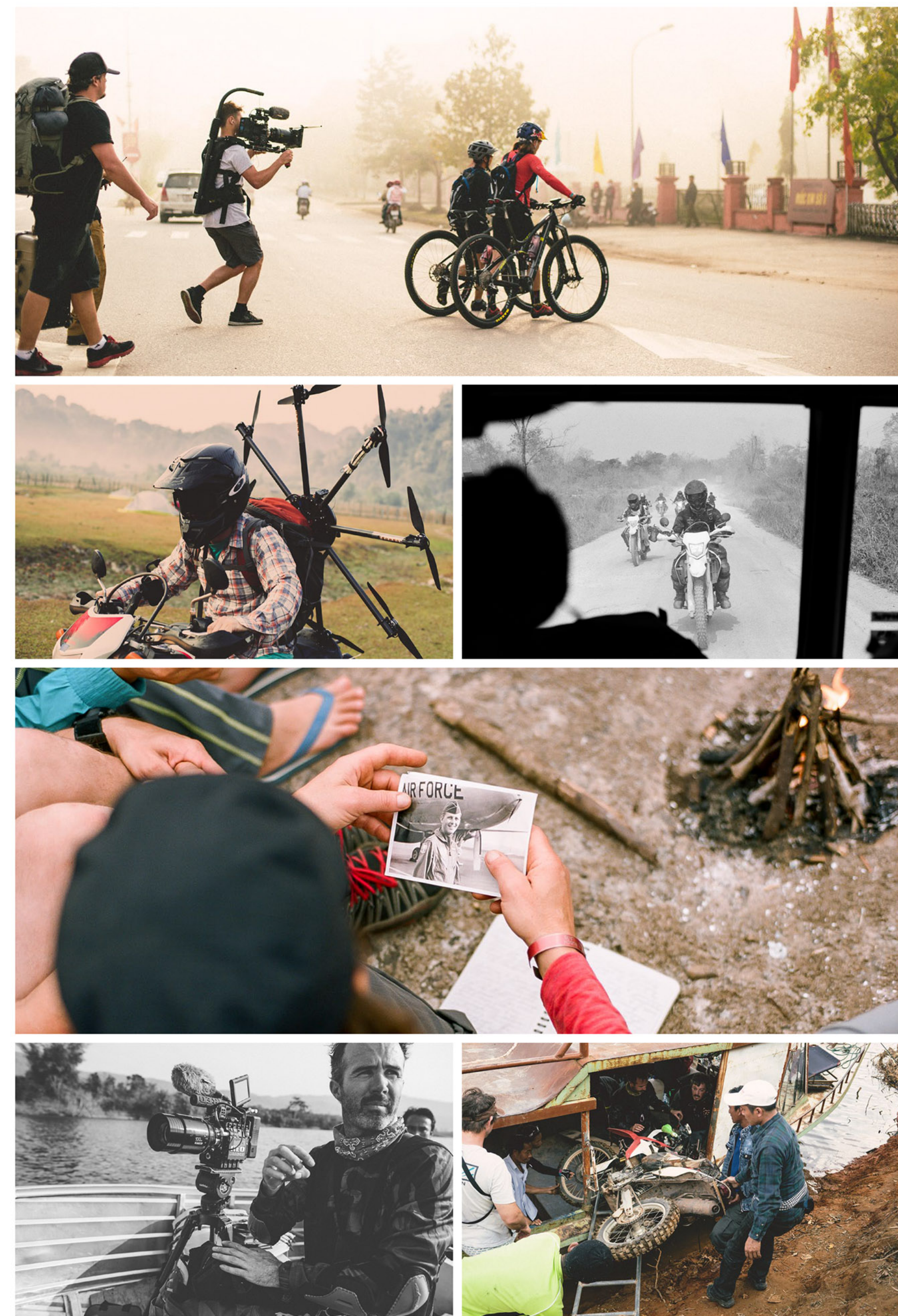
**NS:** Finding our guide, Don Duvall. He's an American living in Laos. He grew up on the East Coast racing sailboats, which turned into navigating. He essentially sailed around the world for two decades and ended up in Vietnam, making his way across the mountains into Laos. He started motorcycle surveying in the early '90s. Hand-held GPS units were just becoming commercially available so he made a living map-making. He would ride his motorcycle, make GPS points, and find all the trails. He mapped the entire country of Cambodia, the majority of the country of Laos, and some of Vietnam.

**I&A:** He's quite the find.

**NS:** He's an adventurer. A wild man. He's out there. He loves the history this place offers. In the jungle, you're finding all kinds of artillery, munitions, Jeeps... remnants of the war. This film was his life calling. Don offered a historically accurate route for us to follow. He had the braided network of paths mapped out, which gave us a template to put our story together. Once we started to talk to Don, we realized that the vast majority of this would be single-track trail — footpaths kept alive as people walked from village to village. There really was no other option to traverse it other than motorcycles. Even if we wanted to ride bicycles, it wouldn't have made sense because we had to carry gear. We were on Honda 250s for the most part, because they're robust. The bikes were sourced out of Thailand, brought over to Laos on little boats in the middle of the night, and run without license plates.

**I&A:** You must've had a pretty scrappy, rough-and-tumble team.

**NS:** Essentially, our whole crew were ex-professional athletes. To get on this shoot, you had to be an amazing cinematographer, or whatever your filmmaking trait was, you had to be amazing on the dirt bike, and you had to have the grit to hang with it. There were no down days, there weren't any breaks. Our director of photography, Ryan Young, was key to pulling this whole shoot off. He engineered a modification to our dirt bikes to put Pelican cases on the back and attach tripod tubes. He machined everything to accommodate our needs. Neil Goss was the strongest rider on our whole crew. He's the guy that can ride as hard as the professionals with a camera on his bike. He's one of the main cameramen for the Baja 1000, and he looked out for the safety of the group. We're psychotic camera guys, just thinking about getting a shot, not about how we could eject off our bikes and impale ourselves on a bunch of freshly chopped bamboo. He always reminded us there was no life evac, no helicopter coming to save us. Then there was Nick Wolcott, our drone pilot — an amazing rider who actually strapped a drone to his back. Our still photographer, Josh Letchworth, was the most novice rider, but he held in there, kept safe lines, and just followed us through. Don started on a motorcycle as well, but he got hurt the first day in Laos... hit a corner wrong, put out an arm to catch himself, and broke his collar bone.





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**I&A:** *On the first day of filming?! How’d you handle that?*

**NS:** He should’ve gone to Thailand to get surgery, but that would have taken him out of the entire trip, so he refused the surgery and wore a sling to stick with us. Everything that he loved was happening around him, and he absolutely wasn’t going to miss out. And really, he was the one guy who knew the trail and everything logistically of where we’re going. You get around a broken collar by bracing it and taking a steady stream of morphine. So our lead guide was high as hell on morphine the whole trip. You’re listening to the guy on the radio wondering, “Alright, is it really a hundred kilometers or ten kilometers? He was tough as hell.”

**I&A:** *How’d the riding experience change day to day?*

**NS:** When we started, we carried way too much stuff. We had shit strapped to backpacks, wore moto boots, full armor — everything. That lasted a day and a half; two days, tops. Once you’re introduced to this environment and how gnarly it is, you’re like, “Let’s get rid of camera shit.” And we destroyed the bikes. Absolutely destroyed them. When we started strapping everything to them, we destroyed the subframes. We took rebar — like you’d build a house with — bent it and welded it to create rebar supports for the subframes so they wouldn’t crack under additional weight. That changed the dynamics of turning the bike, so we had to tune the suspension. Then the suspension got demolished because of all the weight on the bike. We sent three bikes to the graveyard.

**I&A:** *A hellacious but enviable, once-in-a-lifetime experience, it seems. Now that it’s over and the film is done, how do you feel about the finished product?*

**NS:** Couldn’t be happier. The goal was just to bring the actual emotion that we were feeling to the screen. It’s a tough thing to do, but I’m really proud we accomplished that. We went into this having no idea what it would take. To be totally honest, if I could talk to my past self, it would be really hard to convince my past self to do this knowing what went into it. Sometimes it was just blind ambition to push on. Ambition drove us forward, wanting to find a way to tell this emotional story. ■

