



# ZERO DARK

BY JEANEE DUDLEY

*WE ARE SPEEDING* through the woods in a white van. A baby-faced freedom fighter, *WHITE SUNGLASSES*, is at the wheel. He yells to his comrades, "Weapons hot—eliminate all hostilities!"

The bay doors slide open. *TWO SOLDIERS* swing out with automatic weapons as the camera *VIBRATES*.

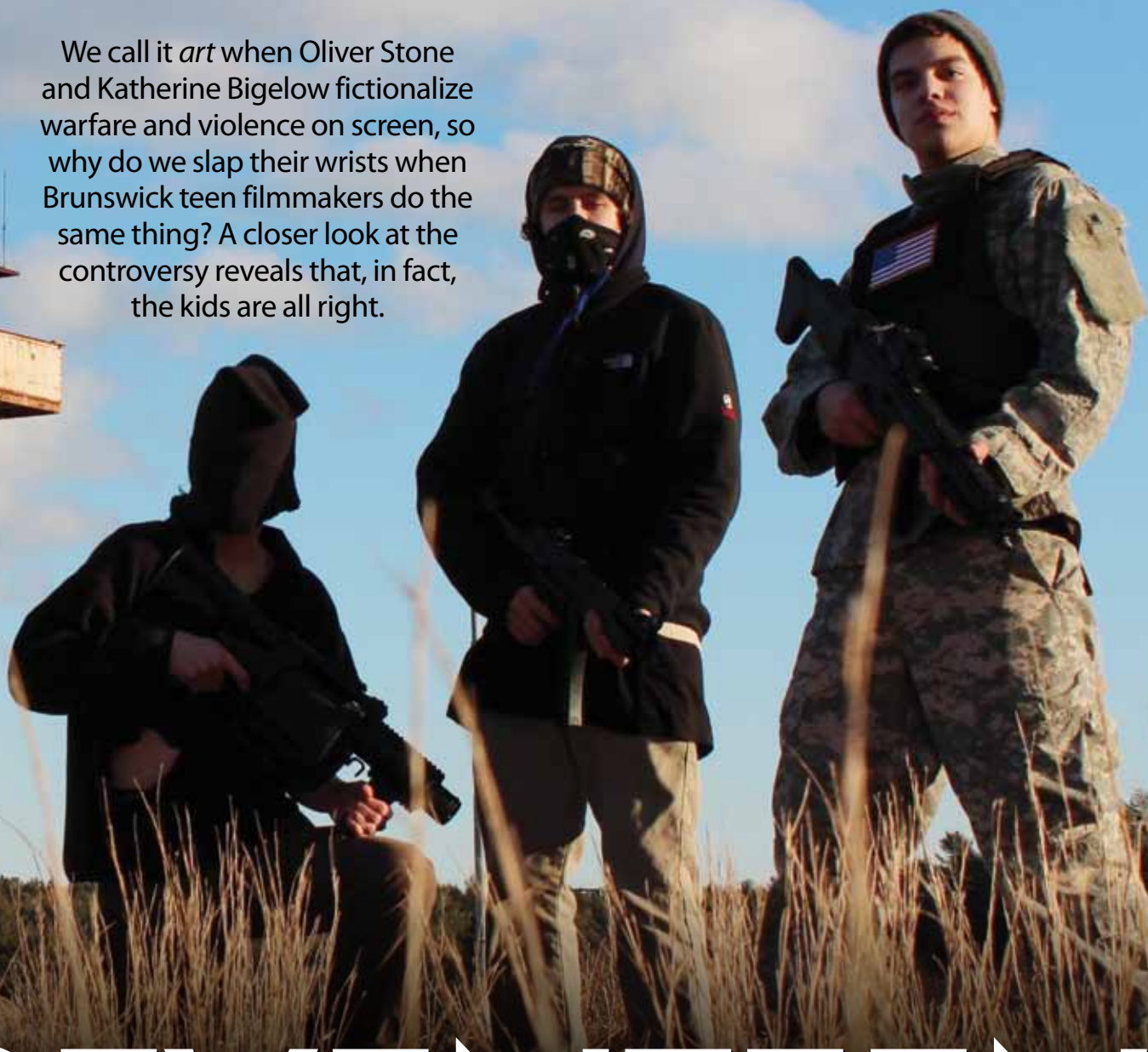
*POV WHITE SUNGLASSES*. Now we're zooming toward two young *SENTRIES* blocking our way. Clearly visible behind

them is a "Welcome Golfers!" sign. In spite of its otherness, the setting looks suspiciously like...the former Brunswick Naval Air Station.

The laser soundtrack bumps with a glitchy, industrial beat like a first-person-shooter video game, except this is real movie footage.

After a less-than-polite exchange of *GUN-FIRE*, the sentries' upper torsos *EXPLODE* into red mist as we careen past.

We call it *art* when Oliver Stone and Katherine Bigelow fictionalize warfare and violence on screen, so why do we slap their wrists when Brunswick teen filmmakers do the same thing? A closer look at the controversy reveals that, in fact, the kids are all right.



# SEVENTEEN

*Two more armed GUARDS in BLACK HOODIES flank a large stenciled GATE CLOSED sign. Good luck to them!*

*The driver's-side shooter, bandoliered and one-handing a Kalashnikov-like AIRSOFT gun, add two more to the body count as we swing right around the concrete barrier.*

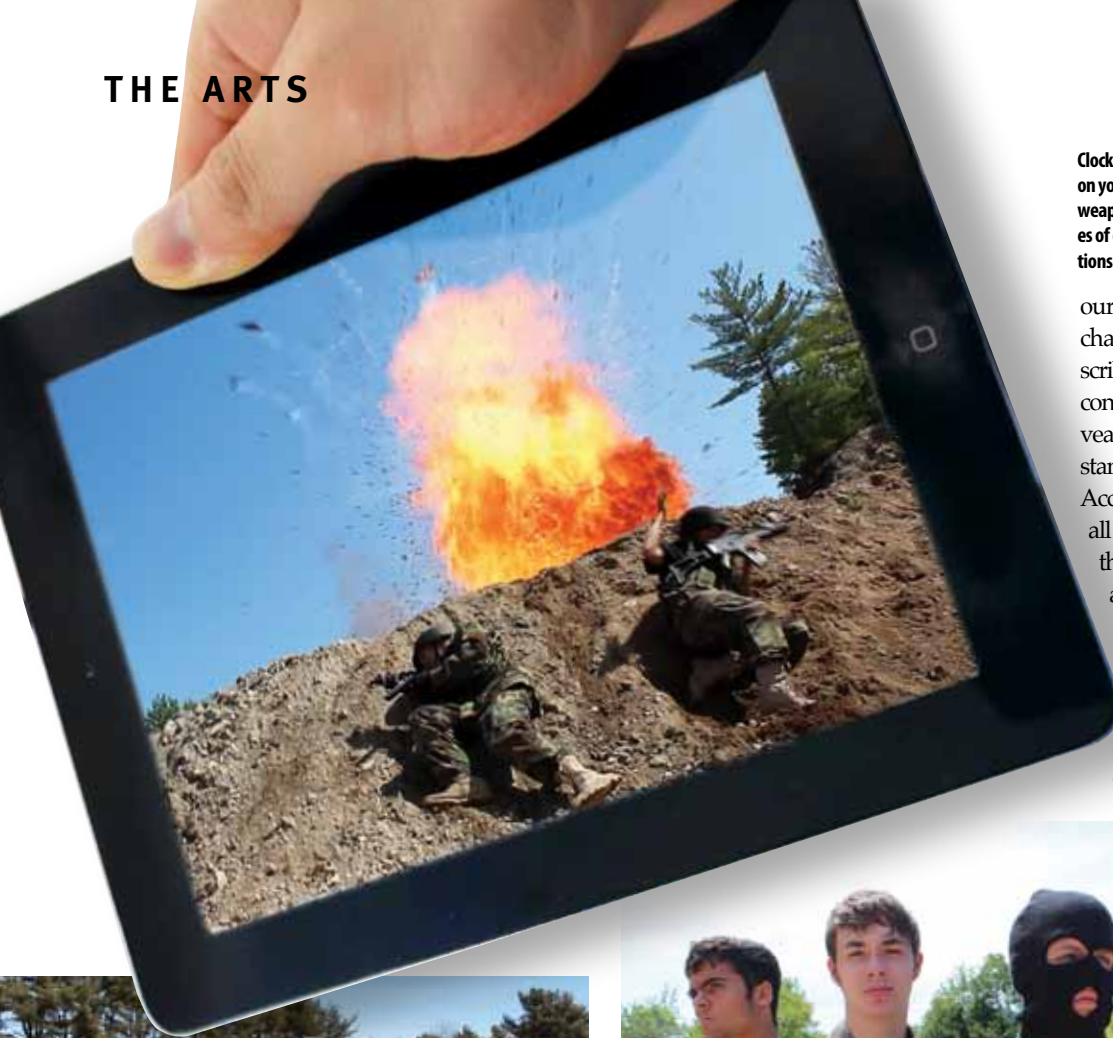
*ANOTHER DEFENDER, looking a bit like the honor student you saw stacking books at Curtis Memorial Library, menac-*

*es in black hoodie until he, too, falls victim to SPECIAL FX and—"Remember to Like and Favorite for awesomeness!"—CGI (computer-generated images).*

*TIGHT SHOT on a SNIPER IN BLACK, his scope locked on the approaching van. A CLOSER LOOK reveals his ski goggles. (Sugarloaf USA?) WE FOLLOW the sniper's bullet from his gun until it smashes the driver's-side window into another red explosion... BRAVO THREE is down!*

**B**efore you dismiss this as a film club movie created in Brunswick by a group of high-school students, fully as sweet as it is scary, consider: Along with a suite of other YouTube clips by the talented USN Films, this three-minute, fifty-seven-second independent film entitled *The Extraction* has earned no fewer than 9,308,000 internet views and is still clicking. When you select it, a POP-UP ad for BlackBerry shimmers onscreen.

## THE ARTS



Clockwise from top: USN's action videos on YouTube as seen on your iPad; student actors in costume with unloaded ersatz weapons prepare to shoot a scene—all the sounds and flashes of gunfire and explosions are edited in later; scouting locations for a day of filming in sunny Brunswick.

our USN Films," Kousky notes. "Our other channel, PDK Films, has 45 thousand subscribers and over 44 million video views. My contract with YouTube prevents me from revealing how much I make, but it is quite substantial. I recently bought a new 2013 Honda Accord Sport [MSRP: \$24,180] and paid for it all at once. I'm partnered with YouTube, so they find me advertisers with relevant ads, and they get a cut of the profits. It's done through Google AdSense, and I get paid each month."

The action-packed films add energy and impact to common film and video game themes. "Our video series called *The Biohazard* has more plot," Kousky



USN Films, led by Brunswick High senior Paul Kousky, produces short, violent, stylized movies involving hostage situations, guerilla warfare, and zombies. Kousky and his team film all over Brunswick, on public and private property.

Kousky started making films several years ago, encouraged by a teacher in middle school, and has learned editing techniques from a filmmaker he follows on YouTube. "FreddyW makes movies like this, and he also produces tutorials," says Kousky. "We use Airsoft guns on our films. They aren't loaded. It's all acting, and then things like gunfire and blood are edited in afterwards."

Once Kousky and his crew punched up their efforts with sophisticated special effects, people started paying attention. The crew's first YouTube channel gained thousands of views, and Kousky saw the opportunity to turn a profit. Today, USN sells space to advertisers like the University of Phoenix and Microsoft Office 365 and reinvests the money into props and costumes to add touches of realism. The cash also provides on-set snacks and drinks for crewmembers, who spend full days acting out dramatic scenes inspired by video games, real events, and classic films.

"As of today, we have over 31 thousand subscribers and over 9 million video views for

says. "So far, we've made three episodes, and we hope to continue with more. The series is about a post-apocalyptic world plagued by a disease that turns people into zombies or 'walkers'—dead people who feed on humans and can transmit the disease through their bite.

"Most of our videos feature two teams battling it out against each other. One is what we call the 'U.S.' team—they wear the same uniforms and camouflage as U.S. soldiers, and are the 'good guys.' The other 'terrorist' team 'bad guys' wear dark clothes and camouflage similar to what video games portray 'bad guys' as looking like. The plots for most of our videos involve the U.S. team rescuing a prisoner, as in

*The Extraction*; stopping an execution, like our most recent video, uploaded yesterday, titled *The Execution*; or infiltrating a base to hack a computer, as in *Amphibious Assault*."

A January 2013 story about the teens in the *Portland Press Herald* mentioned a video on their YouTube channel that had been filmed at the former Brunswick Naval Air Station and at Curtis Memorial Library. This caught the attention of the Regional Development Authority. The agency contacted local police, who then issued a trespass warning to the teens.

"Access to the base was through two different ways," Kousky explains. "The first couple times we filmed there, we just drove through the front gate since it's open to the public. No fences were hopped, no slipping under barbed wire or anything like that. The last time we filmed there, we filmed at the back gate near the golf course. There was a sign that said the area was open to pedestrian and bicycle traffic, so we walked back and filmed there. People would bike or walk through and stand on the side and watch."

It should be noted that Paul Kousky (the son of LCDR Todd Kousky, a former Navy P-3 Orion pilot and 1989 Naval Academy graduate who flew with Patrol Squadron 92 out of Brunswick Naval Air Station) is not exactly a stranger to the Navy base, and naming his film company USN is a subtle homage.

"That Friday," continues Kousky, "we all got called into the office, individually, to meet with our assistant principal and the school resource officer. We all had to sign the trespass warnings." He acknowledges that much of the community has been supportive, and he understands local concerns surrounding filming in public with wardrobe and props like face masks and Airsoft guns.

"An article in the *Bangor Daily News* came out on Sunday, then on Monday we had individual meetings with our school principal," he reports. "They basically said this can't happen at school, that we couldn't bring the Airsoft guns onto school property. That's never been something we'd do. The entire thing has gone on with a weird tone, and it feels accusatory, but people don't know that we're not just running around with guns.

"We put a lot of thought into our videos," Kousky explains. "Planning, between the script and logistics, can take a week or two before we can even start filming. The editing is contingent upon how much time I have. Everyone on the crew is involved in sports and extracurricular activities. A lot of us are Boy Scouts. I'm a Life

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## THE ARTS

Scout. I've completed all of the requirements for Eagle Scout except my project. This summer I'll be doing that, making trail signs."

Kousky is also a lecturer at his church and volunteered as a student tutor last spring with the Riverview Foundation. (His instructive nature is also seen on USN's YouTube channel, in tutorial films that demonstrate and explain with his voice-overs how to insert stock video explosions and muzzle flashes into original footage.) "I've been involved in student government all through high school," he continues. "I'm class president, and I'm involved with fundraising and senior activities like prom. I play a sport every season. In fall, it's soccer. I swim in the winter, and this spring I'm playing tennis."

In a twist of irony, Paul Kousky and a member of his film crew, Nate Hassett, volunteer together at Curtis Memorial Library. While the group was initially banned from the library altogether as a result of the newspaper coverage, the library's director has since met with some of the students and parents to open the doors for conversation. "A week ago, my mom and I went in for a meeting," Kousky says. "The director wanted to make it clear that the reason everyone freaked out was because the guns looked real and were displayed in a public place. We all worked it out, so I can go shelf books again." The library director did not return phone calls about reversing the decision to banish the students.

Kousky and Hassett have been making films together for years. "The first video we made was for a middle school physics project," Hassett says. "We showed the physics of sledding by building different ramps and showing how it all works with speed, momentum, and friction. After that, Paul bought his own camera online, and he was filming everything." Today, Kousky shoots with a Canon Rebel T3i and a Glidecam HD2000 for stabilization and has learned the editing process with programs like Adobe Premier Pro CS5, and After Effects CS5.

Hassett mostly acts in the films, saying that most of the production is left up to Kousky. Hassett attends North Yarmouth Academy and was spared the trespass warnings and meetings with principals. Still, he says, people talk, and he feels the media has portrayed USN Films unfairly. "The *Times Record* ran an article on us and called it 'Kids Shooting Kids.' My response to that is, I understand how may-

be someone would think we were using real guns and call the police. What's offensive is relating that to recent events, making a connection to the Newtown incident.

"There's a double standard," he continues. "We're kids. There's no parental supervision. When kids are making movies like this, people find the negatives quickly."

"I think adults question our First Amendment rights because they think that the way we express ourselves artistically is reflective of how we are as humans, which isn't true," Kousky says. "Action and violence is part of being a teenage boy. What kind of videos do they expect us to make? A romance? A drama? A science-fiction? Adults need to realize that not only does action and violence interest us, but it also interests other teenage boys across the nation, and those teenage boys are our audience. We supply the demand."

Kousky sees a deeper message in the graphic films he creates and those that have inspired him. "I watch a lot of classic action movies. Some of my favorites are *Red Dawn*, *Rocky*, and *Rambo*. *Zero Dark Thirty* is one of the current Oscar movies that I find most similar to what I do. I admire action videos with lots of shooting and explosions because I find it entertaining and exciting. Some adults were appalled at our work, but a lot more seemed supportive and encouraging."

Kousky and his team of 20 or so high school students are well aware of the sensitivity surrounding youths and violence. "People are jumping to conclusions about us. It's not fair to say that people who watch or make violent movies are more prone to partake in violent acts. Some people would say violence is being glamorized, that we're trying to make it look good. But with many violent films, like *Saving Private Ryan*, filmmakers are showing the bad side of war and how awful it is."

Paul Kousky has a promising future. "On October 10, I received a letter of assurance at the U.S. Naval Academy as long as they got a nomination for me. A week later, they received a presidential nomination, so there's a place for me there. I'm waiting to hear back from Boston University with a Navy ROTC scholarship. My goal is to become a Navy pilot," he says, a position he can reach through either program. And if the Navy doesn't work out, he has already established an open door to a career in filmmaking. ■

For more, visit at [portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2013/03/usfilms-extras](http://portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2013/03/usfilms-extras).

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