



Shipbreakers

THE PLACE WHERE SHIPS GO TO DIE

ALANG, IN NORTHWEST INDIA on the Arabian Sea, is a contradictory place. A city where ships from around the world go to be destroyed. It's a land of gorgeous blue skies and filthy grey earth. It's a recycling yard and an environmental disaster. It's the saviour of many poor workers and the killer of hundreds every year. It's the burial ground of ships and the birthplace of steel. Indian men need this place in order to feed their families, while men in countries thousands of miles away need it to take their old, sometimes toxic, vessels. Alang is an extreme example of the gap between rich and poor. People are often forced to take the most dangerous jobs in the world just to survive. As Michael Moore demonstrates in his recent film *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the poor in the United States turn to the army. As Storyline Entertainment and the NFB show in *Shipbreakers*, in India they turn to shipbreaking.

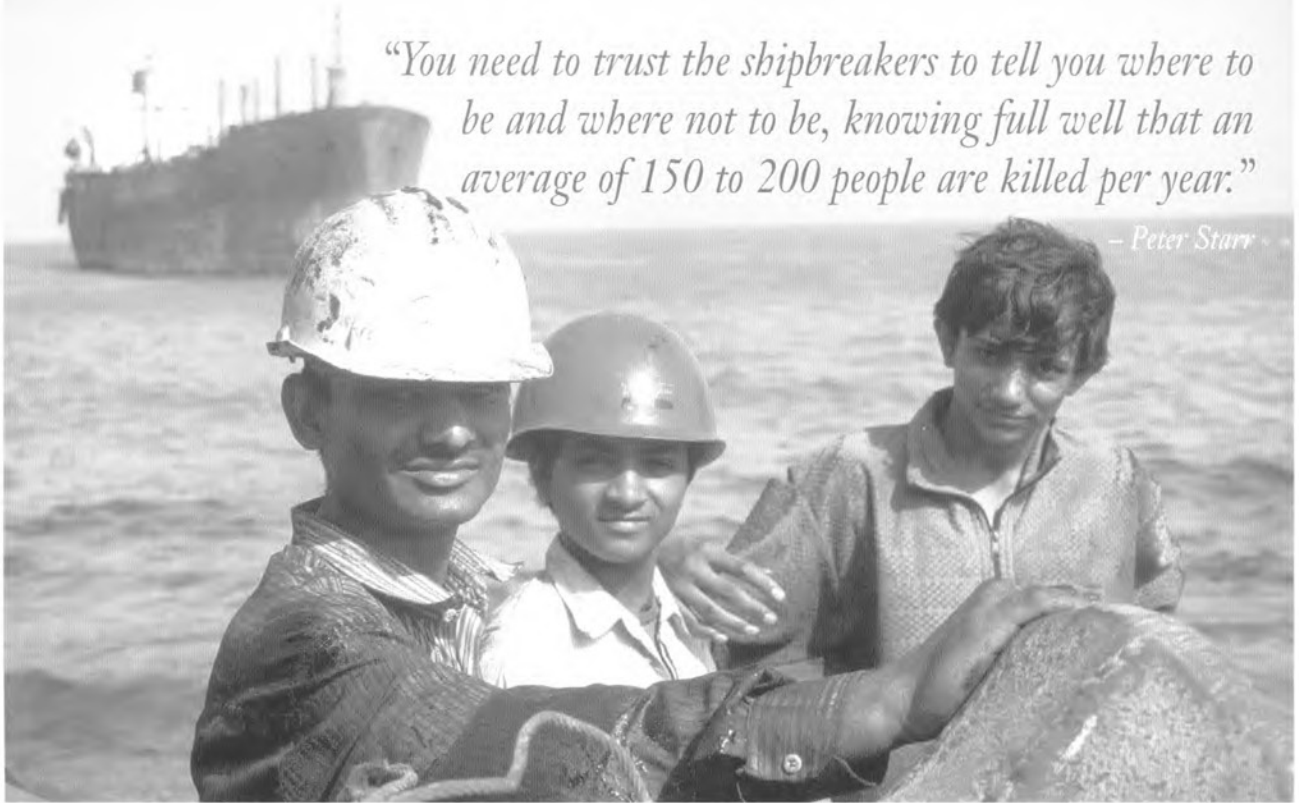
Shipbreakers could have shown India's steel recycling industry from a cynical, North American perspective, but the filmmakers wanted to make a film that took a fair look at what is happening on the shores of this city in the ancient state of Gujarat. The film documents the dangers that recycling ships poses to the people who work there and to the environment around them; however, it also shows that without shipbreaking at least one million people in India would go hungry. Aside from those employed as shipbreakers, the ships that are beached along the shores of Alang bring money to those who sell the scrap metal, work in steel mills, drive the trucks that deliver the metal, and resell any of the valuables found on the ships. This is their gold rush.

Added to Alang's contradictions are the modest lives of the people who live here versus the grandeur of the vessels

they are breaking. Ed Barreveld and Michael Kot, partners in Toronto-based Storyline Entertainment who previously produced *Aftermath: The Remnants of War* (2001), were originally drawn to this story by an article they had read in *Atlantic Monthly*. What sold them on the idea was the work of industrial landscape photographer Edward Burtynsky. His series of photographs of giant, half-broken ships made them realize how well these images could translate to the big screen. "There was a big hunk of steel lying on the beach with men running around, and that sparked our imaginations," says Barreveld. It's unnatural to see ships this size standing alone on the sand instead of floating on the water. According to Peter Starr, a senior producer with the Toronto office of the NFB who worked on the film, looking at the enormous ships falling to pieces is like witnessing the effects of a nuclear holocaust. "It's like 100 apartment buildings being destroyed at the same time," he

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- Peter Starr -



recalls. "As a filmmaker, your jaw drops and you say, 'Wow, this is unbelievable. Where do we start?' There isn't a camera in the world big enough to film this kind of thing."

In the end, they used two high-definition cameras to film the shores covered in ship carcasses. "These are the big, bulky, 'I'm gonna cause you a problem' cameras," says Kot. "And they did." Filming began in the peak of India's summer with temperatures averaging 45 degrees celsius. The heat was hard on the equipment, and one of their monitors blew in the first couple of days. Besides the heat, falling chunks of metal were also a threat. After one camera was knocked around, it became unusable during the last week of shooting. The dangers of the shipyards were also a concern for the crew, who were suddenly in the same position as the shipbreakers. In the film, a doctor says that when the boats are cut, the toxins that burn off can have the same effect on a person as smoking 15 packs of cigarettes per day. Yet Barreveld and his crew felt that the month they spent in the field wasn't enough to cause any long-term damage. The native film crew that came from Bollywood to help with the film felt differently. "They seemed a little more concerned about the hazards than we were because they actually wore protective masks," Barreveld remembers. "They were a bit more paranoid about it."

Barreveld and his team were more concerned about falling chunks of metal than they were about carbon monoxide. A head gas cutter tells of the time he made a mistake on the

job and cut the metal rafter he was sitting on. He fell to the bottom of the ship and was laid-up for days with an injured leg. That was the last accident he ever had. These men learn to be careful on the job through major injuries and the death of others. There are no workplace-safety courses for them, nor was there much preparation for the film crew. "When you're shooting on a ship and the front half of it gets cut off and suddenly the staircase you came up on is gone, you have to find another way off," says Starr. "You need to trust the shipbreakers to tell you where to be and where not to be, knowing full well that an average of 150 to 200 people are killed per year."

Despite all of the difficulties of filming in the shipbreaking yard, the hardest part for the filmmakers was getting into Alang in the first place. "Alang is a closed town, a secure area that is owned by the shipbreaking people," says Starr. "It's run by Captain Deulkar who is the big boss. He calls himself the Rambo of Alang." Although in the film he doesn't seem to be a gun-toting, killing machine *à la* Stallone, he does seem very protective of the area. He believes that in the eyes of other countries, Alang is considered a horrible place to work and he wants to escape that stigma by telling his side of the story. He and many of the other top shipbreaking dogs in India were unsure whether Starr, Barreveld, Kot and their crew would be the ones to help them, or if they would just make a film to perpetuate a negative point of view. After weeks of long meetings, Storyline and the NFB were allowed into the

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shipbreaking yards. Now that the film is finished, they feel lucky they were let in at all. Shortly after they were done filming, Greenpeace became heavily involved in trying to make the disposal of ships more environmentally friendly, and Alang completely shut down all access to journalists and film crews. "It's a fortunate turn for us," says Barreveld of the media shut out. "We had a month to film whatever we wanted and we did, so we've got a feature-length documentary and nobody can top us at this point."

Now that the media have been barred from Alang, Kot doesn't expect his documentary to be welcomed with open arms. "Not everyone is going to be happy with it," says Kot. "I don't think this is related to us. I do think we were fair in our treatment of everyone and I think a couple of enlightened shipyard owners will think the film is balanced." In Canada, the makers of this film hope that audiences will find their work both breathtaking on the screen and a revelation. "Like any good documentary, I hope that it will enlighten audiences about stories they had never heard of before," says Starr. "I've always been a great admirer of films that are at the level of *Baraka*, which are very impressionistic but deal with human stories and also are very cinematic. *Shipbreakers* combines all of those elements."

With Canada's own involvement in the world of shipbreaking—Canada Steamship Lines' *The Manitoulin* was sent to a shipbreaking yard in Turkey in 2002 and the

Canadian-built *Gypsum King* was sent to Alang while *Shipbreakers* was being made—it's important for Canadians to learn what we and other first-world nations are contributing to outside of our borders. "There's an old saying, 'if you're not part of the solution you're part of the problem,'" says Barreveld. "We're part of the problem because we are manufacturers and owners of ships, and it doesn't seem to make sense that if we cannot break down ships in a safe way in this country we just ship them somewhere else." Adding to the pile of contradictions that have built up in Alang is the tug of war over what to do about the world's shipbreaking. On the one hand it's environmentally friendly because all aspects of the ship are reused, but with many ships coming ashore without being properly cleared of toxins, the recycling cancels itself out. It's a matter of opinion whether the good outweighs the bad.

The ancient protector of Alang is a contradictory god. She is the goddess Kali Maa, both the mother and eater of man; the goddess of birth and destruction. The image the people pray to is a figure of a woman who wears the heads of dead men dripping blood on a chain around her neck. Just as easily as an outsider might question the good in a god who kills people, one questions whether the blessings outweigh the horrors in this shipyard. "There's a lot of good work being done, so you can't say it's a bad place. But you can't say it's a good place either," says Kot. "It's just like India. It's beautiful and horrible at the same time."

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