



A crash landing is what it took to convince hard-hitting Perth video journalist Sophie McNeill to take a breather from the world's war zones.

STORY: ARYLENE WESTLAKE

In the middle of an Afghanistan winter, a small SBS news team – Perth-born video journalist Sophie McNeil, a producer and an interpreter – flew into Kabul on their way to interview a couple from the remote town of Sur Murghab whose lives had been turned upside down when family members were killed by Australian soldiers.

Landing in Kabul is always tricky. The strong winds and mountainous terrain are hazards to make the most experienced pilot blanch. The plane came in harder than usual and bounced stiffly on the tarmac, blowing one of its tyres.

"It was almost funny," McNeil recalls from the safety of her living room in Australia. "I thought to myself, 'This can't really be happening'."

Sparks flew against the aircraft window as the landing gear and part of the wing tore

through the runway. When the plane eventually did come to a fiery halt, McNeill did have a quiet chuckle to herself. "How the f*** am I going to get out of here?" she thought. "Worse, the only way of leaving is to get back on the same bloody airplane!"

Over the next few days in Afghanistan, investigative journalist McNeill filmed one of her most stressful, dangerous pieces for SBS's *Dateline* – the Walkley Award-winning *Questions from Oruzgan*.

But, not surprisingly, McNeill's instincts told her it was time to stop and listen.

And listen she did. By the time she settled back into her home in WA, she had decided she didn't want to get on another plane again. Well, not for a few months, anyway.

"I just needed a break. Working my butt off for

seven years is exhausting," she says. "In that line of reporting, you're researching stories, you set them up, you go there, you do the sound, you do the piece to camera, you do interviews and you watch your back constantly.

"You've got to be on top of your game and you need 110 per cent of your attention, so after years of doing that for *Dateline* I just didn't want to get back on another aeroplane for a while."

Rewind 12 years and you wouldn't have convinced a 15-year-old Sophie that heading on her own into a turbulent war zone – East Timor, in this case – wasn't the best idea.

"Funny how having a baby can change your thinking – thinking about my poor parents," she says.

"I think I've already decided my son won't be

BRIEF

allowed a passport because if he does a tenth of the things that I've done, I would have a heart attack!

"It's given me a new-found respect for my parents and what they've gone through having me as a daughter."

In Year 9 at Hollywood Senior High School, Sophie would gaze longingly at the latest pair of designer jeans and worried most about the colour of her hair. Like most teenagers, she had only a perfunctory interest in the world beyond the shores of Perth.

It was 1999 and East Timor was facing its biggest test – the vote for independence from Indonesia.

"I had just finished reading the brilliant book *Hidden Agendas* by Australian journalist John Pilger, which exposed human rights abuse

and injustices all around the world," McNeill, now 27, recalls.

"In particular, I was fascinated by this chapter on East Timor because I couldn't believe that here I was being educated in the Australian public school system – and reading as much as I could about politics – and I had never heard about what was going on in East Timor.

"I didn't know about these terrible atrocities that had been committed by the Indonesian army in East Timor in a place that was pretty much supported by the Australian Government for many years.

"The occupation of East Timor was something that Australians did nothing about, turned a blind eye to, so I couldn't believe this was happening literally an hour and a half flight from Darwin."

But it was watching Pilger's 1994 documentary, *The Timor Conspiracy*, that really sheeted home McNeill's outrage.

"I just cried (through) the whole documentary. It was such a moving piece of journalism," she says. "I walked out and thought, 'Now that I know this is happening, I can't not do anything'."

And she did plenty. McNeill began helping the East Timorese Independence Movement, a group of volunteers who hoped to raise awareness of the atrocities occurring in East Timor under Indonesian occupation.

She spoke at rallies, leading the fight for independence, and helped educate the people about the upcoming vote.

After the UN-supervised referendum in August 1999, which resulted in a clear vote »

for independence while sparking violence, McNeill began helping a group of East Timorese refugees – all 400 of them, who had been sent to an army barracks in East Fremantle.

By the time the refugees returned to Dili after independence was formalised on May 20, 2002, the mainstream media had moved on.

“The news cycle had gone on to something else and no one was interested in what was happening anymore,” she explains.

“I thought, ‘This is terrible. I’m going to go there and do a story about this,’” she adds, recalling her then-amateur ambitions.

“My parents obviously knew that I’d become pretty absorbed with this whole issue. My dad now says if they hadn’t let me go, I would have gone anyway.”

With a video camera borrowed from her high school and contacts made with an East Timorese family she had befriended, McNeill set out to reveal the untold story.

“I decided I wanted to bring these stories to people and make them want to do what I did and become committed to helping,” she says.

Three weeks later, the teenager returned to Perth with a 10-minute video that galvanised support and helped to raise funds to keep her investigation going.

With assistance from the Film and Television Institute of WA, McNeill received training on using a video camera and sound equipment and five months later was back in Dili finishing off her short film *Awaiting Freedom*.

The film, which highlighted the crippling health crisis in the fledgling nation, earned her a Western Australian Young Person of the Year award. In 2001 she won the Inside Film Award and a WA Screen Award in 2002.

One of *Dateline*’s former hosts, George Negus, hailed her as a child prodigy.

SBS took the then 19-year-old McNeill under its wing – knowing a winning formula when it saw it – to tell stories from Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Thailand and Mexico over the next seven years.

Despite working and living in some of the most treacherous and dangerous regions of the world, McNeill is humbled by this chapter of her life.

“The more I travelled and the more amazing people I met ... you just realise that we’re all exactly the same,” she says.

“I met and stayed with a girlfriend in East Timor when I was 15 and, at the end of the day, she was just like any other young 20-year-old girl.

“Despite the fact she had all these terrible things happen to her – had family members killed and was in fear of her life during the violence – she was worried about how she looked, wanted to fall in love, wanted to go to university.”

Sophie also fondly speaks of her friend, Raed Al Athamneh, whom she met while on assignment in Gaza. The father-of-eight has had his home destroyed twice and survives on a pittance, working when he can as a translator for journalists.

“He’s just obsessed about his family and his



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kids and he wanted me to call him and tell him when I had my baby,” she says.

Al Athamneh told McNeill to have at least four children, reassuring the young mother that the sleepless nights would get better once her son turned six months old.

“This is a guy in the middle of Gaza who’s now living in a tent, but wherever you go, everyone’s just concerned about the same things,” she says.

“And this is the thing: I think time and time again you’re reminded that it doesn’t matter where people are or what their lives are like or what horrible things they’ve been through, we’re all exactly the same – which makes it really easy to care about what happens all around the world.

“I think sometimes the problems in the world come from when people think somehow those people in the Middle East are different – they must have a higher pain threshold or maybe they don’t get as upset when their children die, or when their houses get bombed.

“We in the West must use that as some kind of justification because why else do we let these things happen? People must think, ‘They’re used to it. They’ve always had fighting. They must not get as upset as I would if my children died’.

“Well of course they do! That thinking is ridiculous.

“I’m just lucky enough that I’ve been able to

realise this, because I get to meet these people and spend time with them and can relate to them. I think that’s my secret behind it all.”

McNeill would often return home from these trips angered by what she had witnessed.

“I’d come back and be really depressed and upset,” she says, “because you go and see all these horrible things and you come back to Australia and there are all these people whingeing about the price of petrol and all that type of stuff. Honestly, we’re so lucky.”

McNeill says she has learnt the true meaning of living life because of the work she does. She recalls her time spent staying with a family in Beirut and how every minute of the day was celebrated.

“The Lebanese I stayed with lived every day as if it was going to be their last,” she says.

“There is so much war, so much fighting, that they just party hard tonight because they don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow.

“It’s funny, you know – I went to the Middle East to be a journalist and the greatest lesson I learnt was that all that matters is the love of your family. That’s when I decided to come back to Australia and have a baby.”

Looking back, McNeill says that while scary situations often presented themselves, she never once thought of them as life-threatening.

“If not, you wouldn’t be doing this job,” she says.

“At the time I was worrying about whether I filmed something well, whether that policeman was going to arrest me, or whether I should hide that tape. I never thought, ‘Am I going to die?’.

“I don’t do my job because I love taking risks, I’m the biggest wimp in the whole world. I’m scared of flying.”

While filming a story in Iraq, McNeill and her crew needed to drive on a notorious stretch of road outside of Mosul near the Syrian border – an al-Qa’ida hot spot – where another convoy had been gunned down a few days before.



McNeill reporting from Beirut in Lebanon in 2005.

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As she threw on her flak jacket and boarded her truck, the men she was travelling with casually loaded a rocket launcher on to the vehicle. "I thought, 'Oh s***, they're bringing a rocket launcher'," she says.

"I was sitting in the car with my translator, a lovely Kurdish guy, and he said, 'Don't worry Sophie, don't be scared', and then said something in Kurdish to the driver.

"It was only after I got home and translated the tapes that I discovered he had said to the driver, 'See that car in front of us? Just be careful. If that explodes, just drive over to the right there'."

McNeill manages to laugh now, but just a week later a truck full of soldiers were targeted by a roadside bomb.

But she says she'd do it all again. "I didn't go on that road for fun – it wasn't to see how dangerous it was," she says. "It was because we were going to the scene of this horrible suicide bombing that had killed more than 600 villagers.

"Hardly any journalists had interviewed these villagers after one of the most horrific attacks that had taken place since the September 11 bombings, because it was in this incredibly dirt-poor town.

"We wanted to go and interview these people because their story hadn't been told. When we got into the town, there were at least 300 people waiting to talk to us.

"It was amazing. It was so humbling. There is such a huge sense of responsibility that they really thought we could help."

These days, she's awakened not by bombs or gunfire but by her son Nathaniel's hungry cries in her new home in the Sydney suburb of Paddington that she shares with her husband, Reuben – but she's not ready just yet to put away her camera forever.

"I definitely want to continue my journalism career. I'm not prepared to retire at 27," McNeill says. "I'd also like to have a second child one day, but I'm still trying to wrap my head around this one.

"I'll go back to war reporting one day, but I'll just chill out in Australia for a few years and return maybe when Nathaniel's a bit older – he's only a year and a half now."

For now, McNeill is content with her move to Sydney for her new role on Triple J radio's national current affairs program, *Hack*.

"It's good – it's the funnest place I've ever worked," she says.

"A newsroom is already a funny place to work but I have a professional comedian sitting at the other end of the corridor.

"I'm pretty lucky to be hosting *Hack* because you've got half an hour a day to talk about the most important issues for young people, to do the news and not have as many rules as in a normal newsroom. And it'll make sure I'm a good mum for a few years because I can't run off to Afghanistan."

» Sophie is the new host of *Hack*, Triple J's news and current affairs program. You can hear her on weekdays at 5.30pm.

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