



# THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME

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A career built on chronicling the  
deadliest professions

**BY BILL IBELLE**





**D**ECKER WATSON was living a dozen blocks from New York City's World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001, when a commercial airliner speared the North Tower and burst into a fireball, shaking the nation to its core.

"Nobody who lived in Manhattan at that time will ever look at things the same," says Watson, AMD'97, who at the time was 10 years into an advertising career.

Life suddenly looked terribly fragile. While advertising was fun and lucrative, creating 30-second commercials to sell beer and cellphones no longer seemed the best way to spend his time.

So Watson took a huge risk.

He closed his ad agency in trendy SoHo and flew to Los Angeles to launch a new career. He had to start from the very bottom of the television industry.

"I was 30 years old and I went from being the guy at the fancy table who people bring coffee to, to the guy bringing the lattes," says Watson.

Watson apprenticed as a personal assistant to writer/producer Akiva Goldsman (*A Beautiful Mind* and *The Da Vinci Code*) and brushed off his college bartending skills to pay the bills.

The risk paid off.

Today, Watson is co-executive producer of *Deadliest Catch*, the most popular reality adventure show in television history, with 49 million viewers in more than 150 countries. Last fall, he was nominated for an Emmy. This year, he hopes to win one.

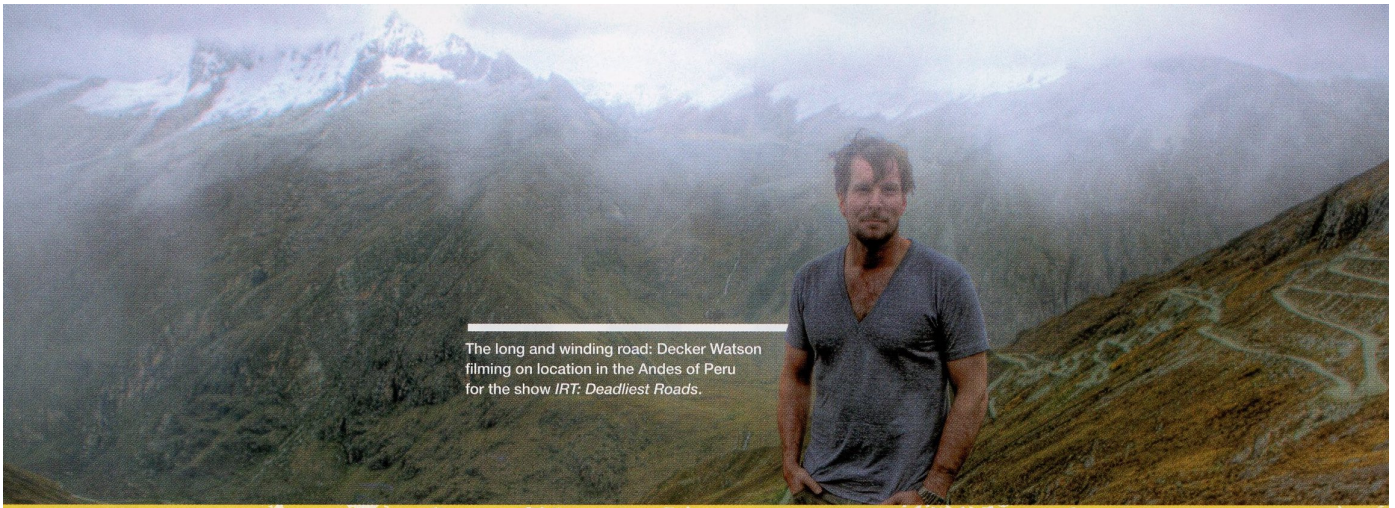
## GOING TO EXTREMES

Watson has always been a restless soul. At Northeastern, he started out as a psychology major, and then switched to business, before finally settling on communications. Co-ops in television and radio, as well as an opportunity to start his own small business promoting nightclubs, prepared him for his advertising career. But it was the culture of exploration and personal risk at Northeastern that best prepared Watson for his ultimate success.

"My Northeastern experience was about more than the sum of my co-op jobs," he says. "I had a string of small successes there, and each emboldened me to push a little harder and take larger risks."

That same restlessness pervaded his early years in television. He apprenticed in almost every element of the industry—lighting, audio, camerawork, production—before landing his first real job as a cameraman on the MTV show *The Hills*, a reality show following the private lives of a group of wealthy young women finding their way in the Los Angeles business world. It wasn't exactly the type of adventure Watson had in mind when he left Manhattan.





The long and winding road: Decker Watson filming on location in the Andes of Peru for the show *IRT: Deadliest Roads*.

But near the end of 2006, he landed a short gig that set the stage for the rest of his career. Watson found his calling as a cameraman covering the Baja 1000, a testosterone-crazed race the length of Mexico's Baja Peninsula.

"These guys were racing across the desert in everything from dune buggies and motorcycles to jacked-up trophy trucks, going off-road at 140 mph," he says. "The race was total mayhem."

One dark desert night, Watson discovered just how dangerous this kind of work could be when support vehicles from two race teams collided head-on and a driver bled to death before his eyes. Watson was distraught, more so when he learned a few days later that a hospital was located just 45 minutes away.

It was Watson's first lesson in how important preparation and contingency planning are in the wild. That lesson bore fruit a year later when he left the baking sun of the Mexican desert for the frozen tundra of Alaska. As a cameraman for *Ice Road Truckers*, his assignment was to film men who worked almost entirely above the Arctic Circle, delivering supplies from Fairbanks to Prudhoe Bay, Alaska.

With temperatures ranging from minus 20 to minus 50, the primary danger was freezing to death, which could happen in minutes if your truck broke down or a window shattered.

"What fascinated me about this kind of work was the chance to go places I could never get to as a civilian, and experience things I would never otherwise experience," says Watson. "I had always wanted to go to northern Alaska and see what life was really like up there, and *Ice Road Truckers* was the opportunity."

On his last day working in Prudhoe Bay, tragedy struck a second time when a pickup truck plowed into a semi that had stopped in the middle of the highway due to whiteout conditions.

"It was 40 below and you couldn't see your hand in front of your face," says Watson. "The driver's lung was punctured, his pelvis was shattered, his window was broken, and he was bleeding internally."

But this time, the crew was prepared. They had been trained in first aid and outfitted with satellite radios, arctic survival suits, and laminated maps of all of the hospi-

tals and rescue stations along the route. Because of this advance planning, the trucker survived.

After Alaska, Watson filmed two seasons of an *Ice Road Truckers* spinoff called *IRT: Deadliest Roads*, one in the Himalayas and the other in the Andes. Each included unusual challenges beyond ice, sheer cliffs, and unpredictable weather. In the Himalayas, the trucks snaked up the serpentine mountain roads loaded with a cargo of highly flammable jet fuel and, because the route was along the border of Pakistan, everyone had to undergo specialized hostage training.

A year later in Bolivia, Watson lived at 10,000 feet and routinely traveled on roads up to 14,000 feet. Living at that altitude has a dramatic effect on the human body.

"It's like having a huge hangover," says Watson. "It's hard to think straight and you have a terrible headache all the time. It's hard to manage risk when your mind isn't working properly, so my job was to keep 50 young guys full of piss and vinegar out of danger while they documented this captivating story."

## WORKING WITHOUT A NET

Eventually, Watson's career would bring him full circle back to Alaska. But first he served an oceangoing apprenticeship filming the reality show *Swords: Life on the Line*.

Watson was assigned to cover Linda Greenlaw, a swordfish captain who gained international fame for bringing her boat safely through the hurricane immortalized in *The Perfect Storm*. Her reputation as a skilled captain provided Watson a modicum of reassurance when a hurricane struck the *Bjorn II* on the Grand Banks off Newfoundland.

"It was like living inside a washing machine," says Watson, who spent 60 days filming aboard the boat. "We were pitching from 45 degrees starboard to 45 degrees port."

While crew members weathered the storm in their bunks, Watson had to be out on deck filming nature's fury.

"I was choking down the vomit, holding myself in place while everything was hurling me around. The hurricane lasted for eight days. It was relentless," he says.

Watson slept in his clothes, making sure his knife and flashlight were strapped to his body and his survival suit was close at hand in case the ship was flipped upside down



by a rogue wave. For Watson, it was the adventure of a lifetime.

“We were out on the Grand Banks, living the reality version of *The Perfect Storm*,” he says. “No cameraman gets to do that kind of work except war correspondents and cameramen for *National Geographic*.”

### THE DEADLIEST CATCH

In 2009, Watson landed his dream job filming the granddaddy of reality adventure shows, *Deadliest Catch*. When the show hit the airwaves five years earlier, it was the first of its kind—a completely unscripted reality series that followed the lives of men and women in one of the world’s most dangerous professions: Alaskan king crab fishing.

“Every great story has conflict and change,” says Watson. “And there’s no greater opportunity for conflict and change than going out on a Bering Sea crab boat. You’ve got man against nature, man against himself, and man in conflict with other people. This is our 10-year anniversary, and we have literally watched these guys grow up—and some up them grow old—before our eyes.”

But the show is about more than just blood and guts. It’s about relationships and character, and how a half dozen captains and their crew navigate the unpredictable waters of marriage, friendship, competition, and camaraderie. Because the cameramen are embedded with the crew, they see everything that happens, 24 hours a day.

“That creates a level of authenticity you can’t get in any other way,” says Watson. “There’s no way they can put up a false persona just for TV. They are going to have to be real with us eventually.”

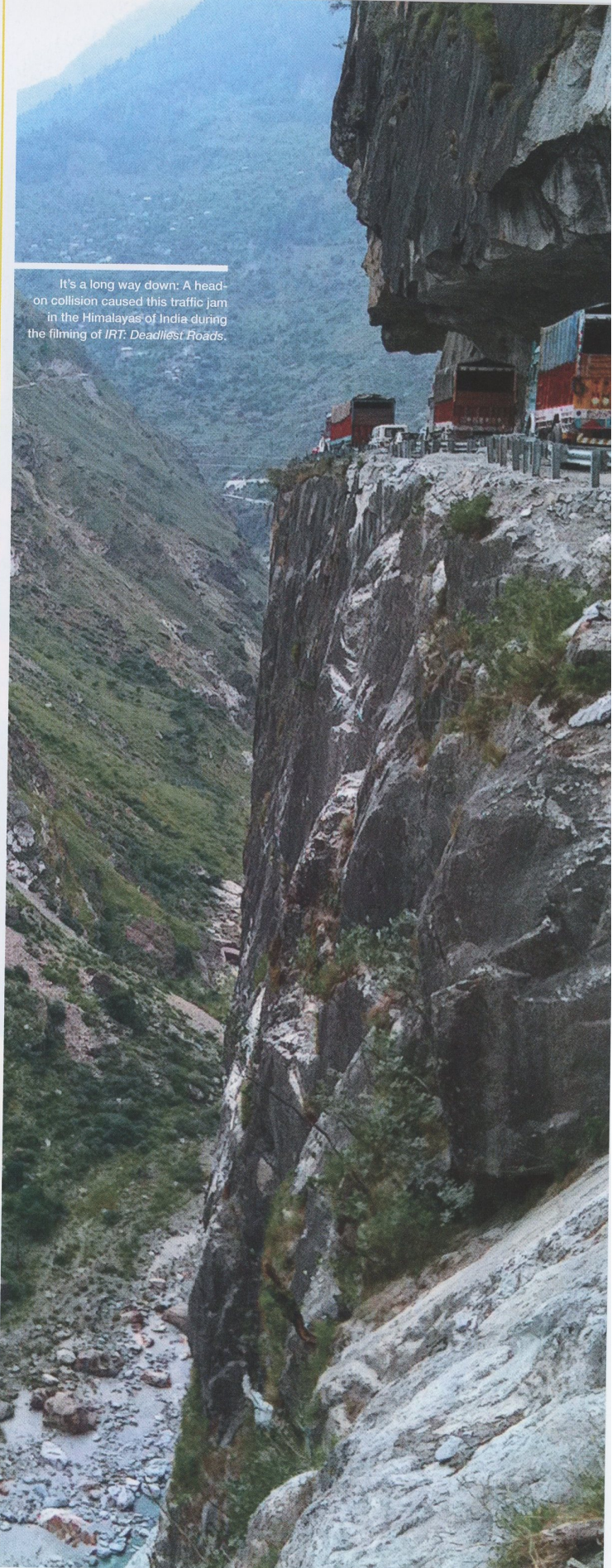
Now 40, Watson has moved onward and upward from his years as an embedded cameraman.

“I can’t do that stuff anymore—not with a wife and a 2-year-old daughter,” he says. “As much as I loved it, being a field producer is a young man’s game.”

As an executive producer, he now flies first class, lives with his family in Los Angeles, and has a stable job with full benefits. The hours are still crazy and his phone rings around the clock during crab season, but he’s no longer shivering in a tent high in the Andes or fighting back the dry heaves during a hurricane at sea.

As the shore-side maestro for the operation, Watson describes himself as “part storyteller, part creative partner, and part therapist.” At any moment he might have to defuse an intense personality clash or organize a rescue operation for an ice-encrusted boat that’s about to capsize somewhere off the coast of the Aleutian Islands.

“When I became a communications major at age 19, I had no idea that it would lead to adventures all over the world,” he says. “Nobody does this for the money. It’s for the adventure of telling a really difficult story.”



It's a long way down: A head-on collision caused this traffic jam in the Himalayas of India during the filming of *IRT: Deadliest Roads*.