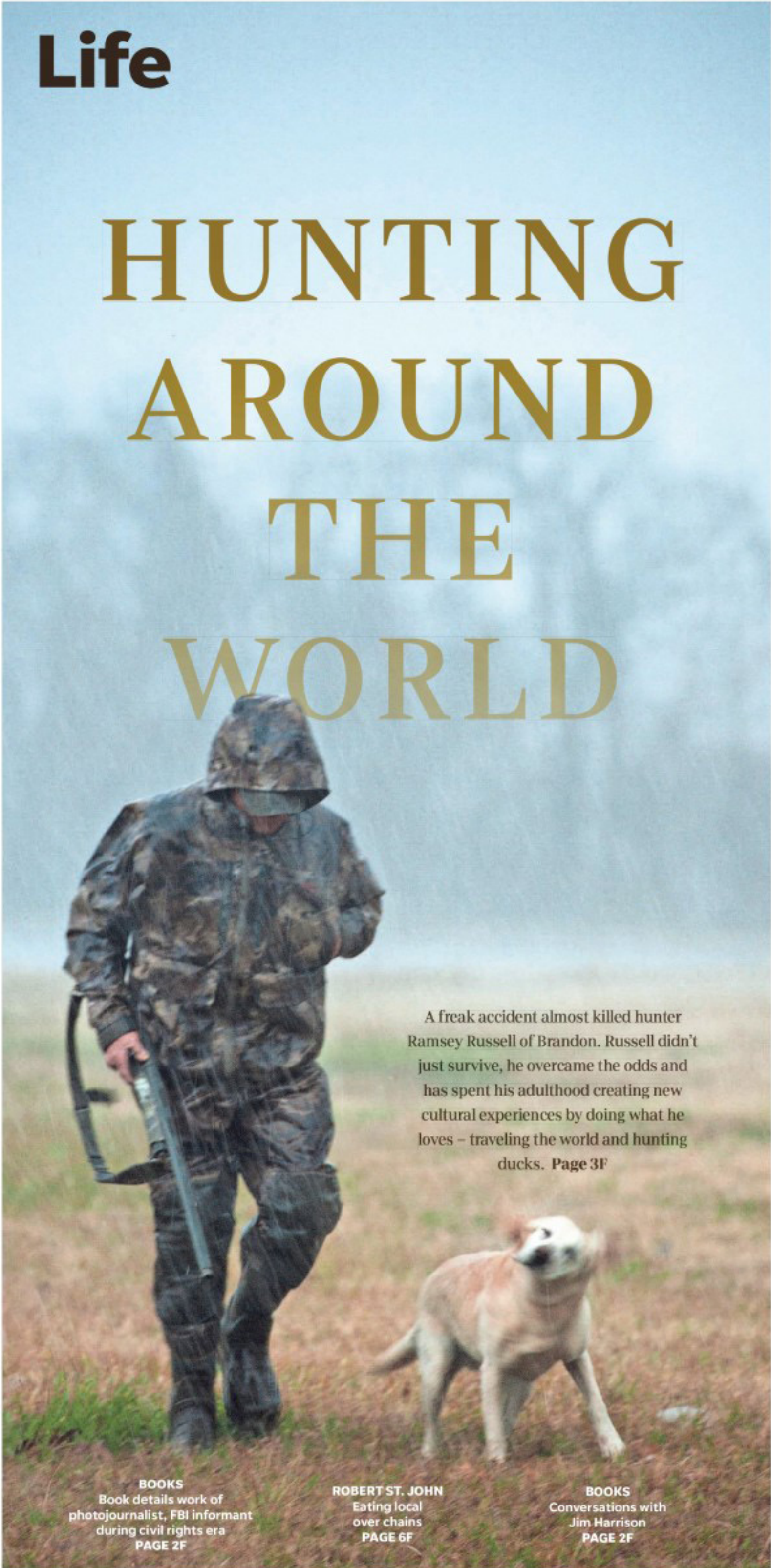


Life

HUNTING AROUND THE WORLD



A freak accident almost killed hunter Ramsey Russell of Brandon. Russell didn't just survive, he overcame the odds and has spent his adulthood creating new cultural experiences by doing what he loves – traveling the world and hunting ducks. **Page 3F**

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An explosion at 15 years old left Ramsey Russell hospitalized with doctors telling his parents that he may lose an arm and both legs — if he lives. While lying in that hospital bed the teen swore he would never again miss the tradition of hunting doves on opening day with his grandfather.

DUCK HUNTER FROM MISS. TRAVERSES THE GLOBE

Russell overcame odds, created new experiences

Brian Broom
Mississippi Clarion Ledger
USA TODAY NETWORK

On May 17, 1982, Ramsey Russell's heart stopped beating.

Russell, just two weeks shy of 16, was painting the garage door of his family home. The paint was oil-based, so he used gasoline to clean the brush in a storage room. A water heater pilot light turned fumes into flames, and the room exploded into a fireball.

"That night, I died," Russell, of Brandon, told the Clarion Ledger in December. "They hit me with the paddles and brought me back to life."

Doctors said he had an 8 percent chance of living.

The freak accident was supposed to take away three of Russell's four limbs and would have made it impossible to do what he loved most — hunting.

Russell grew up in the Mississippi Delta — on the banks of Lake Ferguson in Greenville — and he grew up hunting and fishing. His grandfather was his mentor.

Together, they hunted deer, ducks and doves.

"My fondest memory of hunting in Mississippi is dove hunting," Russell said. "I started going with granddaddy when I was five or six years old."

But this isn't a story about a man who escaped death but lost what he loved to do most in life. Because Russell didn't just survive — he stared death in the face and lived, overcame the odds and has spent his adulthood creating new cultural experiences by doing what he loves — traveling the world and hunting ducks.

A dark place

Immediately after the accident, Russell couldn't remember things for months. He was in excruciating pain from the second and third-degree burns that covered almost 75 percent of his body. He spent two weeks in intensive care and was moved to a burn center in Galveston, Texas.

He described the next four months as a pitch-dark nightmare. To cope, the teen put himself into what he described as a self-induced coma.

"Spiritually and emotionally I crawled deep in a rabbit hole," Russell said. "It's a dark place. It's a human way of coping."

Doctors were unable to relieve the pain with medications because the drugs would slow the growth of skin needed for grafting.

He was bathed in diluted bleach and dead tissue had to be frequently scraped from his body.

One night during recovery, Russell



Russell's Labrador, Cooper, obediently jumps into the back of the truck after a very wet walk out at Willow Break Hunting Camp in Warren County.

PHOTOS BY BARBARA GAUNTT/CLARION LEDGER

said he had a dream. He was walking down a stone hallway in a castle with presence behind him. The presence talked to Russell and calmed him. Russell said he then came to a tall, open window and outside it was a beautiful day with blue skies. The temperature was perfect and green grass invited him to walk barefoot through it.

Russell said the voice told him he could go outside, walk in the grass and the pain would end. Instead, he was vaulted back to reality.

"I woke up screaming, 'God, save me,'" Russell said. "I was absolutely aware after that. I was out of that rabbit hole."

Bouncing back

Russell remained in the burn center for two more months. He underwent over 70 surgeries and doctors were able to save his arm and legs.

However, recovery was far from complete.

Finishing high school was difficult. More surgeries and physical therapy took time. The 16-year-old's scars and bandages also took their toll.

"I didn't want to leave the house, but I had to go to school," Russell said. "It wasn't so bad my senior year because I skipped half of it."

In fact, he skipped so many classes that he didn't graduate.

Months later, though, he finished high school and later enrolled at community college. He then transferred to Mississippi State University and earned a degree in forestry. His self-esteem began to improve, too.

He started cycling and swimming in high school and his body became

stronger.

While attending MSU, he even rode his bicycle from Boston to the West Coast, a 78-day journey that raised \$30,000 for the Mississippi Burn Center.

"I didn't think there was anything I couldn't accomplish," Russell said. "That's what I needed."

And the accomplishments kept coming. Russell finished his forestry degree and completed graduate school. He married and had children. He also compiled an impressive resume of forestry jobs in both the private sector and federal government.

His love of the outdoors also grew, particularly duck hunting. He began going to Canada where he and friends hunted with an outfitter. The number of people that went with him grew so much, the outfitter asked Russell to begin booking hunts. Russell started GetDucks.com, an online business that booked hunting trips in Canada and Argentina.

The business was well-received and began to require more and more time. Between his job with the federal government, a side business of forestry consulting and GetDucks.com, Russell was sometimes missing two and three nights of sleep per week.

A path of adventure

Russell and his wife knew he had to choose a path. Leaving a steady job with benefits wasn't easy, but in 2010 Russell made a decision.

"It just kept grating at me," Russell said. "This is what I want to do. This is fate."

Russell continued to offer more hunts



After a wet morning at Willow Break Hunting Camp, Ramsey Russell pulls off his rain gear before heading in to get warm and dry. Just about everything that hangs outside the door says, "hunt."

in places largely unknown to the hunting community and his business took on a life of its own.

"We've brought so many hunts to the world the world hasn't heard of," Russell said. "Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Sweden, the Netherlands, South Africa, Australia, Peru; some of the world's greatest duck hunts."

"Mongolia — whoever heard of shooting bar-headed geese in Mongolia? We're always looking and discovering hunts."

Booking hunts is only part of the business. Russell personally hosts many hunts and travels to find new locations. In the last 18 months he's hunted on six continents and averages 150-200 days of travel per year.

"It's an adventure," Russell said. "It's like being Christopher Columbus."

Although it has its downsides, Russell realizes he's living what many would consider a dream. He travels the world, experiences different cultures and food, and makes friends he otherwise would have never met. He also realizes that if it were not for the explosion that almost killed him and the scars that remind him of it, he would not be where he is today.

"I almost died," Russell said. "I've got photos of clients that died."

"You can't take life for granted. You're one breath away from not having it. I learned that at too young of an age. Life is about living, not just doing. It made me very, very thirsty to live life to its fullest. It's a mighty big world, but I'm going to see it."