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Ramsey Russell and his dog Cooper enjoy a view in Alaska while hunting.

## A NEW DAWN

A freak accident nearly killed him at age 15. Now, this duck hunter travels the world.

BY BRIAN BROOM

**O**n May 17, 1982, Ramsey Russell's heart stopped beating. He was just two weeks shy of turning 16 and was painting the garage door of his family's 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," he says. "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 almost took away three of Russell's four limbs and would have made it impossible to do what he loved most — hunting.

Russell, who lives in Brandon, Miss., grew up hunting and fishing in the Mississippi Delta on the banks of Lake Ferguson in Greenville. His grandfather was his mentor. Together, they hunted deer, ducks and doves. "My fondest memory of hunting in Mississippi is dove hunting."

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 traveling the world and hunting ducks.

### A DARK PLACE

Russell couldn't remember things for months after the accident. 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 says. "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 frequently be scraped from his body.

One night during recovery, Russell says he had a dream. He



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

Russell says 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,' I was absolutely aware after that. I was out of that rabbit hole."

## BOUNCING BACK

After that, Russell remained in the burn center for two more months. He underwent more than 70 surgeries, and doctors were able to save his injured arm and legs. But 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 says. "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 on time.

Months later, though, he finished high school and 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 had started cycling and swimming in high school, and throughout the years, his body had become 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 says.

The accomplishments kept coming. Russell finished his forestry degree and completed graduate school. He married and had children. He 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 who went grew so much that the outfitter asked Russell to book hunts. Russell started GetDucks.com, an online business that coordinated hunting trips in Canada and Argentina.

The business was well-received



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— RAMSEY RUSSELL



Russell shares his passion for hunting with others on trips around the world through his business [GetDucks.com](http://GetDucks.com).

and began to require more time. Between his federal government job, consulting on the side, and [GetDucks.com](http://GetDucks.com), Russell was sometimes missing three nights of sleep per week.

### CHOOSING ADVENTURE

Russell and his wife knew he had to choose a path. Leaving a steady job with benefits wasn't easy, but in 2010 he did just that. "It just kept grating at me," Russell says. "This is fate."

Russell continues to offer trips in places largely unknown to the hunting community. "We've brought so many hunts

to the world that the world hasn't heard of," Russell adds. "Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Sweden, the Netherlands, South Africa, Australia, Peru; some of the world's greatest duck hunts."

Booking hunts is only part of the business. Russell hosts many of the excursions and travels to find new locations. He's hunted on six continents and averages 150 to 200 days of travel per year.

Although it has its downsides, Russell realizes he's living what many would consider a dream. He travels, experiences cultures and food and makes friends with

people 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 says. "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." ■

— **BRIAN BROOM** is a reporter for the (Jackson, Miss.) *Clarion Ledger*