



DISCOVERY CHANNEL MAGAZINE

Does Mike Rowe *really* have TV's Dirtiest Job?

The guys with the cameras
tell their filthy stories.

By Daniel Weiss



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Rowe: as seen on the Discovery Channel.

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TV cameraman Doug Glover

was standing in a San Francisco sewage plant, at the bottom of a five-story shaft, trying to maintain his balance in a mountain of slippery – and smelly – human waste. From above, a man sprayed excess sewage off a pump, pelting Glover with falling filth. Glover had been in some strange situations before – but nothing like this. “I was splashed in the face and mouth with several thousand people’s [waste],” he says. “I walked out and just wiped my face off and thought, ‘OK, now I have every single disease known to man.’”

Glover works for *Dirty Jobs*, the Discovery Channel series that seeks out the most disgusting, dangerous, and downright disturbing workplaces in the world. And the man spraying that sewage at just the right angle so it would hit Glover on the way down? That was Mike Rowe, the show’s host, spending a day as a sewer worker.

In his five years on the show, Rowe has taken on jobs whose very names are enough to turn the stomach – avian vomitologist, roadkill collector, sludge recycler. And that means his four-man crew – a field producer, two cameramen and a sound person – go right with him. But, the crew says that they have it a lot tougher than Rowe.

Why?

Because Rowe doesn’t have to work for Rowe. The former opera singer has a tendency to be a bit, shall we say, playful on the job. Spend a day with Rowe and he might push you in the mud, as he did field producer Dave Barsky during a bloodworm harvest off the coast of Maine. Or he might hit the wrong button on an industrial machine, nearly knocking you into a vat of molten steel. “I’ve had a few fearful moments,” says Glover, whom Barsky calls Rowe’s “crash-test dummy” because he’s sent into hazardous territory first. “But,” Glover says, “I enjoy it.”

So does Rowe – even though he maintains, not exactly with a straight face, that he is the victim here. “Dave really does believe that it’s an important part of the show to make sure that I suffer,” Rowe says. “So whenever possible, I prefer to return the favour.” Barsky admits that yes, well, maybe the practical jokes do go both ways. But he says, smiling impishly, that Rowe’s suffering serves a purpose. “That’s the best television there can be – seeing someone else’s pain,” says Barsky, “and it also helps illustrate how difficult these jobs are.”

For example, when red fire ants feasted on Rowe’s arms as he harvested alligator eggs from a Louisiana swamp, Barsky insisted on a few extra takes to make sure there was enough footage. “If he has to suffer through twenty more fire ant bites,” says Barsky, “it’s gonna have to happen. Sorry, buddy.” Which may explain why Rowe pushed Barsky into the Maine mud. “Barsky’s just a freaky little hobbit who deserves as much pain as can be administered,” deadpans Rowe.

But the host and his shenanigans are not the only hazards the *Dirty Jobs* crew faces. In fact, there are so many dangers they have become connoisseurs of the bizarre. For Barsky, the shoot that stands out was one of his first. He was in a cave that was home to 40 million bats. Poo and pee rained down in a steady stream, filling the air with levels of ammonia that made it impossible to breathe without a gas mask. Dressed in his customary sweatshirt and shorts, he had to wade through a lake of guano, filming Rowe and a bat biologist as flesh-eating beetles chewed at his bare legs. “To this day,” Barsky says, “that’s still one of the most



amazing things I've done with my life."

But just when you think you've seen and smelled it all, along comes a workplace like Skulls Unlimited International – an American company that strips animal carcasses to the bone for display. The image of skin and fat shaved from bear skulls and the stench of the leftover rotting flesh boiling away is enough to revolt even the most jaded dirty jobs aficionado. "The smell is in you forever," says cameraman Chris Whiteneck. "You'll never forget that smell."

At the end of a workday, the crew isn't exactly fit for polite company. When Barsky gets home, his wife heads to the

Decorated with the usual filth, Rowe (at left) and Barsky laugh it up in the photo on opposite page. Above, Glover does some heavy lifting and below, Rowe puts a protective cover on cameras in a salt mine.



THE DIRTY THIRTY CHALLENGE

Hold your nose, steady your stomach,

and consider whether you'd be willing to tackle even five of these jobs. Mike Rowe and his crew have endured them all:

- Sludge Recycler
- Baby chicken sexer
- Pigeon-poop cleaner-upper
- Sewer inspector
- Disaster clean-up crew member
- Garbage collector
- Shark catcher
- Car stripper
- Sausage maker
- Skull cleaner
- Garbage pit technician
- Duck habitat cleaner
- Casino food recycler
- Exterminator
- Plumber
- Mud driller
- Storm drain cleaner
- Owl vomit collector
- Chimney sweeper
- Hot tar roofer
- Salmon carcass counter
- Poo pot maker
- Bug breeder
- Hoof trimmer
- Coal miner
- Fuel tank cleaner
- Monkey trainer
- Steam ship cleaner
- Zoo keeper
- Volcano mud bath mixer



SOUTH AFRICA SURPRISE

Mauled by a monkey

On a *Dirty Jobs* shoot, sometimes Mike Rowe's pranks are the least of your concerns.

Not an hour after arriving at a South African monkey rehabilitation center, the *Dirty Jobs* crew had become well acquainted with Paddy, the center's dominant male. The crazed vervet had already scratched Mike Rowe's face and pounced on a camerawoman. Then it was soundman Chris Whiteneck's turn. "A gray thing shot across the floor and Chris went down in a pool of blood," says Rowe. Whiteneck had lost a hunk of his calf to Paddy's jaws, but rather than head to the hospital, which would have meant canceling the shoot, he valiantly limped through and got stitches the next day. Still, a raging infection almost cost Whiteneck his leg, and among the crew, there is a low-level fear of what could happen next. "The question has evolved from, 'Oh my God, what is this?'" says field producer Dave Barsky, "to 'Oh my God, how quickly can this kill me?'"



other side of the house, and he triple-washes his clothes so they'll be ready for the next dirty job. Glover, on the other hand, simply peels off his soiled rags and bids them good riddance. "My detergent is Glad trash bags," he says. Those garbage bags come in handy on shoots, when Glover uses them to protect cameras and recording equipment from flying scum. And if a job involves explosives, a \$10 piece of Plexiglas can work wonders to preserve a delicate, \$50,000 camera. But there was nothing



Above, Barsky rests up after a long dirty day in a charcoal factory. Below left, Whiteneck recuperates in a hospital after his encounter with a mad monkey (inset, top left).

they could do to save a camera that melted in a crew member's hands during a recent shoot at a Missouri steel mill.

Sometimes the gear can be a life saver. When a furnace used to forge horseshoes exploded, singeing Rowe's brows and fusing his contact lenses to his eyeballs, the crew's faces were shielded by their cameras. But they've taken their licks. Every shoot, it seems, has its perils. At the Louisiana alligator farm, Rowe and the farmer were about to release some of the reptiles into the swamp when the boat carrying Barsky and Whiteneck flipped over, plunging them and \$100,000 worth of equipment into the mud. As Barsky looked for his glasses, which were broken in the accident, Rowe seized the moment. "I picked up one of the alligators," he says, "and threw it straight toward Dave."

"Great TV," Barsky says. "I guess." ■

Get the dirt without getting dirty every Monday at 10 p.m. (Singapore/Hong Kong time) on Discovery Channel.