

MEDAL of HONOR

MEDAL OF HONOR, *Produced and Directed by Roger Sherman,
to Air Nationwide on PBS on November 5, 2008*

August 12, 2008 (Washington, D.C.) – In **MEDAL OF HONOR**, a new documentary that PBS announced today will air nationwide on November 5 at 9 p.m., powerful stories of those who have received our nation's highest military honor beg fundamental questions about the nature of the human spirit and what it means to have the courage of a hero. What makes a person face almost certain death in order to save the lives of others? What gives a person the strength to endure unspeakable acts of torture under the hands of an enemy without losing the will to carry on? And is every person, if put into the same situation, capable of such virtues? Can we all be heroes?

Produced and directed by Roger Sherman, the 90-minute film traces the history of the Medal of Honor from a profile of Sgt. Paul Smith, the first soldier to receive a Medal of Honor in the Iraq war, back to its creation during the Civil War. Among those profiled in the film are a Holocaust survivor who single-handedly defended a hill from an advancing enemy force in the Korean War; an injured Navy SEAL who saved the lives of two comrades by swimming for two hours to bring them to safety; and a Marine at Iwo Jima who alone silenced seven Japanese bunkers with a flamethrower to clear a path for his demoralized company.

MEDAL OF HONOR explores these extraordinary, almost inconceivable acts of heroism for which the medal has been awarded through intimate accounts of fear and the realities of surviving war, movingly told by the living recipients themselves.

"The Medal of Honor has fascinated me for a long time," said Roger Sherman, the producer and director. "I've always been aware of it as a profound, solemn symbol of military heroism, but like most people, I've never fully understood its history, how it's bestowed, or even why certain people receive it and others don't. I wanted to dig into that history, and in the process pay tribute to the valor the medal represents and explore the questions that awarding such a medal raises. On the one hand, the medal seeks to define heroism, but how does one do that? And while most of us would certainly agree that anyone wearing a Medal of Honor is a hero, every recipient I've met would categorically deny their heroism."

Vietnam veteran and Medal of Honor recipient Drew Dix explains in the film, "When we wear the Medal of Honor, we wear it for all those who fought. There were just witnesses who saw what we did."

Mary Foerster, vice president of Communications of Boeing Integrated Defense Systems, noted why The Boeing Company was proud to provide funding for the film: "Boeing has a long history of supporting our military men and women with the best products, systems and technologies to carry

out their missions. We are now honored that we can help tell the story of the unselfish courage and sacrifices they made to keep us all free.”

MEDAL OF HONOR reveals the story of how the medal was introduced during the Civil War to boost morale and to attract soldiers to re-enlist and not desert. It was frequently awarded to flag bearers. These unarmed soldiers “led the charge,” historian Allen Mikaelian explains in the film. The flag indicated to officers where their troops were. In 1863, a soldier named William Harvey Carney dropped his rifle and picked up the stars and stripes when the flag bearer in his company was shot. He was wounded in the battle but never dropped the flag. For his valor, Carney became the first African American to receive the Medal of Honor.

Only one Medal of Honor has ever been awarded to a woman: Mary Edwards Walker, a Civil War doctor captured and imprisoned as a spy by the Confederates. Her medal was revoked post war, when the medal criteria were tightened: it could only be awarded to active duty soldiers in battle. Walker, however, refused to give it back.

To date, only 3,473 Medals of Honor have been awarded. Has it become a medal one has to die to receive? Since Vietnam, just seven have been awarded, all posthumously — two for service in Somalia, one for service in Afghanistan and four for service in Iraq. Three of those were for falling on a hand grenade. Indeed, the classic reason cited for receiving a Medal of Honor is falling on a grenade to save the life of fellow soldiers.

In addition to Walker and Carney, other Medal of Honor recipients profiled in the film include Sgt. Alvin York (portrayed by Gary Cooper in the 1941 film *Sergeant York*), who was conflicted between his religious beliefs against killing and his duty to serve his country in war, and Smedley D. Butler, one of only 17 people to receive the Medal of Honor twice, for his service in Vera Cruz, Mexico, and for leading an attack on Haiti. Gen. Butler served in every conflict from 1898 through World War I but eventually became one of the most outspoken critics of the U.S. military’s interventionist policies. He attempted to return his medal awarded for his service in Vera Cruz, but superiors ordered him to keep it.

No Medals of Honor were awarded to African Americans or Asian Americans who served in the two world wars. In the 1990s, however, the military, after being pressured by Congress, began reviewing its records and eventually awarded Medals of Honor to eight African Americans and 22 Asian Americans. In 2001, it began reviewing battle records of Jewish veterans.

Among them was Tibor “Ted” Rubin, who is interviewed in the film about his combat experience in the Korean War. Rubin was a Hungarian immigrant who had been liberated from the Mauthausen concentration camp by U.S. forces as a boy. He immigrated to the United States and joined the Army as a way of paying back the country that had saved him. He served in the Korean War, where his anti-Semitic sergeant “volunteered” him to defend a hill against the North Koreans all by himself. Stashing hand grenades and rifles in fox holes, he jumped from one to another to create the illusion that he was a whole company. Alone, Rubin held the hill for 24-hours, slowing the North Korean advance. Later, he was captured and held as a POW. In prison, he saved the lives of more than 40 fellow soldiers, using survival skills he had learned at the Mauthausen concentration camp.

Another immigrant to receive the Medal of Honor and who is profiled in the film is Alfred Rascon, whose family snuck across the border from Mexico when he was an infant. Rascon is one of only 75

medical personnel to receive the medal. He explains in the film that a medic in combat is faced with godlike decisions: “You can’t take care of five or six people at the same time. At that time you have to make a decision that literally is going to come back and bear on your life for a very long time.” He was awarded the Medal of Honor for one of the many firefights his squad was in. He pulled men off the battle field, threw himself over a soldier to protect him from hand grenades, got hit by the shrapnel himself, and was shot. The paperwork recommending him for a medal went missing for 34 years. He finally received his Medal of Honor in February 2000.

While all the Medal of Honor recipients interviewed in **MEDAL OF HONOR** respect the sacrifice and dedication to duty the Medal of Honor represents, not all of them respect the wars in which they were earned. Charles Liteky is one of only five Army chaplains to receive a Medal of Honor, which he did for risking his life to save others in a horrific battle in Vietnam. He is also the only person to return the medal. After years of anguish about his involvement in Vietnam, in 1986 he left his medal at the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., as a protest against U.S. military action against impoverished nations, especially in Latin America. He explains in the film, “I’m not a pacifist. People have a right to defend themselves, nations have a right to defend themselves, but the means which we use is another question.”

Other Medal of Honor recipients interviewed in the film include John W. Finn (World War II), Walter D. Ehlers (World War II), Hershel “Woody” W. Williams (World War II), Hiroshi H. Miyamura (Korea), Ronald E. Rosser (Korea), George “Bud” Day (Vietnam), Bob Kerrey (Vietnam) and Mike E. Thornton (Vietnam). The film also profiles Sgt. Paul Smith, who received the medal posthumously for an action in Iraq. Smith’s story is told by three soldiers who fought with him that day: Sgt. Michael C. Seaman, who fed ammunition to Smith until he was killed, and Sgt. Daniel Medrano and Sgt. Harry Delauter, who also fought in that action.

MEDAL OF HONOR will have its national premiere screening on September 18 at the Paramount Theater in Denver, in conjunction with the Medal of Honor Conference 2008, an annual meeting of recipients of the Medal of Honor and their families. There are currently 103 living Medal of Honor recipients. Fifty-five are scheduled to attend.

MEDAL OF HONOR is a co-production of Florentine Films/Sherman Pictures, WETA Washington, D.C., and The Washington Post Company; Producer, Director, Cinematographer: Roger Sherman; Narrator: Alfre Woodard; Associate Producers: Nathan Sterner and Gwyn Welles; Editor: Juliet Weber; Original Music: Teese Gohl; Executive Producer: Ken Burns; Executive Producers for WETA: Dalton Delan and David S. Thompson. Funding for **MEDAL OF HONOR** has been provided by The Boeing Company.

Sherman co-founded Florentine Films in 1976 with Ken Burns and Buddy Squires, each of whom continues to produce films independently under the Florentine banner.

About WETA

WETA Washington, D.C., is the third-largest producing station for public television and the flagship public broadcaster in the nation’s capital. WETA productions and co-productions include *THE NEWSHOUR WITH JIM LEHRER*, *WASHINGTON WEEK WITH GWEN IFILL* AND *NATIONAL JOURNAL*, *AMERICA AT A CROSSROADS* and *IN PERFORMANCE AT THE WHITE HOUSE*. Additionally, for more than 20 years, WETA has partnered with filmmaker Ken Burns to bring his landmark documentaries to the nation via public television, including the 2007 film *THE WAR*. Sharon Percy Rockefeller is president and CEO of WETA. More information on WETA and its programs and services is available at www.weta.org.

About Boeing

Boeing is the world's leading aerospace company and the largest manufacturer of commercial jetliners and military aircraft combined. Additionally, Boeing designs and manufactures rotorcraft, electronic and defense systems, missiles, satellites, launch vehicles and advanced information and communication systems. As a major service provider to NASA, Boeing operates the Space Shuttle and International Space Station. The company also provides numerous military and commercial airline support services. Boeing has customers in more than 90 countries around the world and is one of the largest U.S. exporters in terms of sales.

About Roger Sherman

Roger Sherman's documentaries have been honored with of a Peabody Award, an Emmy Award, two Academy Award nominations, and many other accolades. Among his many films, *Richard Rodgers: The Sweetest Sounds*, was named to a Top 10 list and was called "An extraordinary film biography, perhaps the best ever produced in the *American Masters* series" by *The Wall Street Journal*. *Alexander Calder*, a co-production with *American Masters*, was pronounced "an American masterpiece" by Charlie Rose. Other films include *The American Brew*, the rich and surprising history of beer in America; *The Rhythm of My Soul*, a profile of country, gospel, bluegrass and mountain musicians; *Don't Divorce the Children*, chronicling the effects of divorce on children, which became mandatory viewing in courts in a dozen states; and, *The O.J. Simpson Trial: Beyond Black & White*, a look at the African-American perspective of the criminal justice system.