



Lidia Celebrates America

Holiday for Heroes

For most of us, Christmas is a time of celebration with friends and family gathered around the table – exchanging memories from the past and wishes for the future. For members of the military, the desire to be part of this is particularly strong, especially when they are stationed thousands of miles away from home.

In the emotional and uplifting film, *Lidia Celebrates America: Holiday for Heroes*, celebrity chef Lidia Bastianich meets with seven veterans who reflect on their service. Each discusses their longing to be reunited with family during holidays, the challenges and sacrifices of their work, and the pride they take in having defended our country. Together, they create a distinct image of the diversity of the United States military:

- August Dannehl, a Californian filmmaker with Middle Eastern roots
- Yonas Hagos, now a Mid-west entrepreneur, once a refugee from the Sudan
- Bryan Anderson, a triple-amputee who love surfing and skateboarding in LA
- Marlene Rodriguez, a Southwestern college student still dealing with PTSD
- Willie Sherrer, a blues singer and barbecue stand owner in New England
- Mike Dowling, a retired Marine K9 handler, now a celebrated author in LA
- Edith Casas, a Califonian Navy vet reinventing herself in communications

As a firm believer that food is the tie that binds us together, Lidia uses her unique gift to bridge cultures, creating a link between the military and civilian lives of our five subjects. As she talks with each veteran, Lidia uncovers what foods mean ‘home’ to them, from Marlene’s mother’s lasagna to Willie’s father’s brisket. As Lidia prepares these dishes with the veterans, she taps into their love for home and country.

This continuing theme of Holiday for Heroes culminates in a celebratory dinner at Naval Station Norfolk, the world’s largest naval base. In Norfolk, Virginia, Lidia joins forces with Norfolk’s own Culinary Specialist program to prepare a classical holiday meal for our heroes – and 250 of the active duty service men from the base! As Lidia finished her hard work on the holiday meal for the troops, she is surprised by her good friend Bob Woodruff – the acclaimed ABC news anchor injured by an IED in Iraq.

Bob and Lidia sit down with the service men and the veterans, breaking bread and reflecting on good times, hard times, and the pride and love in between.

A multi-faceted film celebrating the lives and holiday traditions of some of our most heroic American veterans.

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Format

The stories and interviews with our five heroic veterans serve as the centerpiece of our film. This hour-long documentary captures the intimate lives of our seven subjects as they reflect with Lidia on their experiences of enlisting in the military. As they share the story of what prompted them to fight for their country, and how that decision changed their lives, we delve into their unique cultures, and the food traditions which remained with them during the most challenging moments overseas.

After visiting with our five veterans, Lidia heads to Naval Station Norfolk, capturing the spirit of what it means to be on active duty. The largest naval station in the world, Norfolk support the Atlantic Ocean, the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. During her tour of the base, Lidia boards the USS George Washington, an aircraft carrier in active service. Once on deck, she interacts with naval personnel, including the commander, members of their culinary team, and the chaplain. Inspired by her meetings with these servicemen, and her visits with the veterans, Lidia prepares a classic holiday dinner that celebrates the men and women of the Naval Station.



Joining Lidia at Norfolk is ABC news anchor **Bob Woodruff**. Covering the Iraq war, Bob was injured by an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) in 2006. Woodruff sustained severe head injuries and shrapnel wounds, and was rushed to the neurosurgical team at the US Air Force Hospital. Swelling in his brain necessitated a medically induced coma for 36 days following his injuries – and for close to a year afterward, Woodruff still ‘lost’ words, and had to relearn to walk. It would be over a year before he could return to the air. As someone who experienced the Iraq War on the front lines, and sustained injuries during his time there, he brings a unique insight to the conversations he and Lidia share with the servicemen and vets on Norfolk Naval Base.

The Veterans, and their War Stories



Yonas Hagos came to the United States at 10 from a refugee camp in Sudan. After 9/11, Yonas joined the Army, because he “wanted to pay back America for what it had given [him]”. Before he could complete his first tour of duty, Yonas was seriously injured by a rocket-propelled grenade. Pronounced dead on the scene, Yonas was revived at a field hospital, going on to receive a Purple Heart. Now fully recovered, he has become a successful entrepreneur, husband and father!



Purple Heart recipient Marlene Rodriguez is one of only 500 women who have been awarded the Purple Heart. On her third tour to Iraq, she was hit by an IED, sustaining injuries that forced her to retire from the Army in 2009. This wasn’t the first time she was attacked, having survived another IED blast and a firefight on her second tour. Despite her very apparent war wounds – PTSD, seizures, and severe back pain – she still says “I miss it so much...the structure, the discipline, the leadership. The honor.”



Triple amputee Bryan Anderson enlisted in the Army in April 2001 and shipped out on September 11, 2001. He served two tours of duty in Iraq, stationed in the Baghdad area. In October 2005 an IED was set off by the Humvee Bryan was driving, resulting in the loss of both of Bryan’s legs and his left hand. After 13 months of rehabilitation at Walter Reed Army Hospital, Bryan has returned to skateboarding, surfing and rock climbing, and gives motivational speeches for veteran organizations across the country.

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The Veterans, and their War Stories, continued



August Dannehl joined the Navy after September 11th. After being honorably discharged in 2010, he pursued filmmaking with "The War at Home," a film about an Iraq veteran who witnesses the death of a childhood friend. August attended the Jon Stewart Veteran Immersion Program, which offers veterans job training in television and film. Outside of his love for the big screen, August has a passion for cooking, and works to create feasts that celebrate other vets.



Willie Sherrer's journey has not been easy. After a deep personal tragedy, Willie fell into alcoholism, poverty and homelessness. With the help of his wife, Betty, and the local VA Hospital, he worked hard to recover. It wasn't long before he was accepted to Culinary Command, an elite program that trains vets in new career as cooks. Now, Willie & Betty sling their brisket seven days a week at their barbecue stand in Methuen, Mass – with time for Willie to belt out the blues in the local VFW!



After graduating top of his Marine Military Police class, Mike Dowling met an animal that would change his life: a bomb-sniffing dog known as Sargent Rex. He and Rex served in Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2004, an experience about which Mike has written a memoir: *Sergeant Rex: The Unbreakable Bond Between a Marine and His Military Working Dog*. These days, Mike works closely with many veteran organizations, including the VFW and American Legion.



Edith Casas served in the Navy for close to 10 years as an Aviation Boatswain First Class. During her tours she was stationed on the USS Nassau, an aircraft carrier traveling throughout Europe and the Middle East. Onboard the Nassau, Edith was responsible for the launching and recovery of naval aircraft. Now living in Hollywood, Edith is attending California State University, studying communications.



"It is a proud privilege to be a soldier - a good soldier - with discipline, self-respect, pride in his unit and his country, a high sense of duty and obligation." *George S. Patton Jr.*

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Partnerships

In order to cast this film with the widest possible net, we will partner with existing groups who have access to both veterans and active duty soldiers. We are currently talking with the USO (the United Services Organization) among organizations. We are currently working with the following organizations:

- Naval Station Norfolk
- We Are the Mighty
- Heroes Sports
- Warrior Fitness
- Pride Mobility
- Fairways for Warriors



Key Personnel

Laurie Donnelly

Director of Lifestyle Programming, Executive Producer for National Program Development, WGBH

Emmy and Peabody award-winning Executive Producer Laurie Donnelly has been guiding content for some of national public television's most beloved documentaries and series for over 30 years. As the Director of Lifestyle Programming and the Executive Producer for WGBH's Studio Six, Laurie oversees a wide range of projects, from award-winning series like *Sacred Journeys with Bruce Feiler* to the upcoming documentary series, *Rare*, featuring National Geographic photographer Joel Sartore. Credits include: *Rare*, *Lidia Celebrates America - Home for the Holidays*, *I'll Have What Phil's Having*, *Rough Cut Woodworking with Tommy Mac*, *Simply Ming*, *Mind of a Chef*, *Moveable Feast with Fine Cooking*, *Caring for Mom & Dad*, *The Silk Road Ensemble with Yo-Yo Ma*, *Lidia Celebrates America*, *Broadway or Bust*, *NOVA: Cracking Your Genetic Code*, *The Goat Rodeo Sessions Live*, and much more.

John Maggio

Director and Producer

John Maggio is a principle producer, director and writer with Ark Media. His work appears regularly on both of PBS's premier series: *FRONTLINE* and *American Experience*, including *Kinsey*, *Billy the Kid*, *College Inc.* and *The Private Life of Bradley Manning*. Maggio's films have been honored with the National Emmy Award, Writers Guild Award, an Independent Spirit nomination, as well as multiple News and Documentary Emmy Award nominations. His work has premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and has screened at festivals around the world. He recently completed the four-part PBS series *The Italian Americans* in 2015. He wrote and directed *Bonnie and Clyde* and is adapting Candace Millard's New York Times bestselling book *The River of Doubt* for *American Experience*.

David Espar

Editor

David Espar is an editor, writer and producer. He has served as senior producer and producer on numerous project including the ten-part PBS series, *Rock & Roll*, *War and Peace in the Nuclear Age*, *People's Century Series*, as well as several episodes of *NOVA* and for the widely celebrated series *American Experience* (including *Nixon* and *The Kennedys*). Espar also wrote, produced and directed *Hollywood Censored* for the WGBH special series, *Culture Shock*, and part one of the seven-part series *Evolution*. His numerous professional honors include two Peabody Awards, an Emmy Award, Blue and Red Ribbon Prizes at the American Film Festival, CINE Golden Eagles, a Gold Plaque from the Chicago International Film Festival, a Silver World Medal from the New York Festivals, Two Writers Guild Awards and a Worldfest Houston Gold Medal.