



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**THE LARGELY UNTOLD STORY OF HOW WORLD WAR II AND ITS
AFTERMATH SET THE STAGE FOR THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT**

BREATH OF FREEDOM

**TWO-HOUR SPECIAL NARRATED BY CUBA GOODING, JR. PREMIERES
MONDAY, FEBRUARY 17 AT 8PM ET/PT ON SMITHSONIAN CHANNEL™**

**General Colin Powell and Congressman John Lewis Among Those
Interviewed in Black History Month Premiere**

New York, January 23, 2014 – They fought for democracy in a segregated army and marched as conquerors into a country in ruins. Finding a “breath of freedom” in post-World War II Germany, African-American soldiers experienced for the first time what it felt like to be treated as equals—and returned home determined to change their country. This largely unknown chapter in American history is told in *BREATH OF FREEDOM*, a new two-hour documentary narrated by Academy-Award winner Cuba Gooding, Jr. (*Red Tails*, *Men of Honor*) premiering Monday, February 17 at 8pm ET/PT on Smithsonian Channel.

Featuring interviews with former Secretary of State General Colin Powell and Congressman John Lewis, this is the remarkable story of how World War II and its aftermath played a huge role in the Civil Rights Movement. It’s a story told through the powerful recollections of veterans like Charles Evers, brother of slain Civil Rights icon Medgar Evers. From the beginning, black soldiers felt the absurdity of being asked to fight for freedom while being denied it in their own army. “My brother and I and all the other young negroes, we couldn’t stay in the same barracks with the white soldiers,” Evers says. “We couldn’t eat in the same dining hall with the white soldiers. We had all white officers.”

“The military had actually built a separate air base just to train blacks,” recalls Roscoe Brown, who would become one of the legendary Tuskegee airmen. “So the segregation was so silly and stupid, they would spend money to build a separate air base to keep blacks separate from whites.”

BREATH OF FREEDOM traces African-American soldiers from Normandy to the Battle of the Bulge, when American forces faced such a crisis that they had no choice but to break the rule of strict segregation and allow black soldiers to fight side by side with whites. As the fighting neared an end, one young black soldier, Leon Bass, experienced first-hand the horror of racism under Nazi Germany when he helped liberate the Buchenwald concentration camp. "I was an angry young black soldier when I came into that camp, and I was wondering why I was fighting this war, but now a transformation had taken place," Bass says. "Something had changed me. And I realized, human suffering is not relegated to just me."

African-American soldiers who were stationed in Germany after the war experienced a situation that was completely new to them. They were served in restaurants, they could have relationships with white women, and for the first time in their lives they discovered what it was like to be respected. For these soldiers, it was a defining experience.

As a young lieutenant in the army, General Powell was stationed in Germany in 1959 when he experienced what he called in his autobiography a "breath of freedom." He remarks in the film, how despite the gains being made in the U.S. at the time, black soldiers "were in many ways better off when we were stationed in Germany."

After serving in World War II, Medgar Evers returned home to Mississippi and became one of the state's leading Civil Rights activists. His wartime experiences gave him skills he put to good use in organizing for change, but his growing prominence also made him a target. On June 12, 1963, Evers was shot and killed outside of his home in Jackson – ironically, by another World War II veteran who was white.

Another young Civil Rights activist, Congressman John Lewis, often risked his life, at times side by side with veterans. In the film he comments, "These black veterans identified with the civil rights movement and became a part of it. They felt, that they had gone abroad fighting for democracy and equality. And now we have to come back home and fight again. And they did fight."

Among the interviews featured in BREATH OF FREEDOM are:

- **Lonnie Bunch**, founding director of the National Museum of African-American History and Culture, whose father served in Germany.
- **Roscoe Brown**, one of the famed Tuskegee Airmen and former squadron commander of the 100th Fighter Squadron of the 332nd Fighter Group.

- **Dr. Leon Bass**, stationed in England and Germany during the war. He fought in the Battle of the Bulge and was one of the liberators of the Buchenwald concentration camp in 1945.
- **Harold Linton**, former GI who was stationed at Tempelhof in Berlin in 1960. He experienced the Berlin airlift and the construction of the Berlin Wall. He met his wife Ingrid while serving in Germany.
- **Joseph Hairston**, an officer who served with an artillery regiment in Italy, and went on to become the army's first black helicopter pilot. In the 1960s, he was an organizer in the Civil Rights Movement.
- **Judge Charles V. Johnson**, who joined the Navy in 1948 and was stationed in Germany. After returning to the United States, he got involved in the Civil Rights Movement and was president of the local NAACP chapter in Seattle.
- **Walter Patrice**, the first African-American from his hometown of Poughkeepsie, NY to be commissioned as an officer. He was drafted in 1943, and then went to Great Britain, France, Belgium and Germany leading a Pioneer Battalion. After his return from Germany, he became active in the NAACP.
- **Jon Hendricks**, World War II veteran that would go on to become a well-known jazz musician and member of the legendary vocal trio, Lambert, Hendricks & Ross.

BREATH OF FREEDOM is produced by Broadview TV, Smithsonian Networks, and MDR/ARTE. Broadview TV is one of the leading independent German documentary production companies. Director is Dag Freyer. Executive Producers for Smithsonian Channel are Joy Galane, Charles Poe and David Royle.

Smithsonian Channel is owned by Smithsonian Networks, a joint venture between Showtime Networks Inc. and the Smithsonian Institution. Its programs are largely inspired by the assets of the world's largest museum complex. Smithsonian Channel features award-winning original documentaries, series, and groundbreaking programs highlighting America's historical, cultural and scientific heritage. Smithsonian Channel brings the American experience home in high definition and Dolby Digital 5.1 and is available to customers of DirecTV, Comcast, Time Warner Cable, Charter Communications, Cablevision, Verizon, AT&T, and more. Learn more at www.smithsonianchannel.com.

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