

TRUE LIVES

A New Limited Series from the Producers of P.O.V.

For Immediate Release

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REGRET TO INFORM

"A powerful directorial debut interweaving archival footage and intimate interviews with American and Vietnamese women, who inevitably experienced the war in deeply personal, yet profoundly different ways." – San Francisco Chronicle

Academy Award® Nominee, George Foster Peabody Award Winner

Documentary Distributed by American Public Television
Available for January – December 2005 Scheduling

In 1968, on her 24th birthday, Barbara Sonneborn received word that her husband, Jeff, had been killed in Vietnam while trying to rescue his wounded radio operator during a mortar attack. "We regret to inform," the telegram began. Twenty years later, Sonneborn, a photographer and visual artist, embarked on a journey in search of the truth about war and its legacy, eloquently chronicled in her debut documentary, **Regret to Inform**.

Framing the film as an odyssey through Vietnam to Que Son, where Jeff was killed, Sonneborn weaves together the stories of widows from both sides of the American-Vietnam war. The result is a profoundly moving examination of the impact of war over time. The film is "so exquisitely filmed, edited and scored, it is the documentary equivalent of a tragic epic poem," writes *The New York Times*. "Every word and image quivers with an anguished resonance." The film received an Academy Award® nomination for Best Documentary Feature, won a George Foster Peabody Award, and won the Best Director and Best Cinematography documentary awards at the 1999 Sundance Film Festival.

Regret to Inform will be broadcast on public television stations as part of *True Lives*, a series presented by American Public Television and American Documentary, Inc. *True Lives* is a new programming initiative from the producers of P.O.V.

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In 1988, at the time Ms. Sonneborn began this project, she had met only one other American war widow. Despite the support groups that existed for Vietnam veterans, she was unaware of any support network for the wives left behind. Propelled by her desire to find other women who had experienced the same loss on all sides of the war, and to understand what could be learned about war through their stories, Ms. Sonneborn put together a production team in 1990 and sent out several thousand letters searching for widows, first in the U.S. The women were difficult to find; unlike World War II, where widows and veterans were honored and respected, during the Vietnam War they were often castigated. With the help of many Vietnam War veterans, the press, and other survivors as she found them, Ms. Sonneborn talked with more than 200 American widows during pre-production for the film. “Many of these widows – as well as the veterans and children of soldiers killed in the war – shared their experiences in ways they couldn’t before,” she says. “I was overwhelmed by how the suffering from the war continued. As one widow, whose husband died after the war from the effects of Agent Orange told me, ‘It’s not like the war is here and then it’s over. It starts when it ends.’”

In 1992, Sonneborn traveled to Vietnam, accompanied by Nguyen Ngoc Xuan, a South Vietnamese woman whose first husband was killed in the war fighting for South Vietnam. Xuan later married an American soldier and moved to the U.S. in the early 70’s. She agreed to serve as Sonneborn’s translator on the trip and to share her own story in the film. On their journey through Vietnam – where more than 3 million people were killed during the war – they found women everywhere who wanted to be interviewed. “They were quite surprised and very moved that an American widow wanted to hear their stories,” Sonneborn recalls. “The women recounted in painful detail the human and environmental damage caused by what they call ‘the American war’ in Vietnam.” One woman in the film describes, “The cruelty we experienced was longer than a river, higher than a mountain, deeper than an ocean.” Another adds, “If you weren’t dead, you weren’t safe.”

With heartbreaking candor, the women describe the struggles to put their lives back together in the wake of war. An American woman remembers receiving a letter from her husband after being told of his death. “I thought, well, maybe he’s not dead! Oh, they made a mistake – you know, this is the proof. Then I read the date on it and I realized.” For many widows, the war followed the soldiers home. One woman tells how her husband returned safely from the war, but went out to the garage one day and shot himself. “I love you sweetheart,” he wrote in a suicide note, “but I just can’t take the flashbacks anymore.” As these women bear witness, they transform their private sorrows into a collective acknowledgement that the price of war can be measured in many ways, but it is always too great. Says Nguyen Ngoc Xuan, “In Vietnam, my neighbor’s husband die, my neighbor’s son die, too. Sometimes you ashamed to cry, because what make my pain greater than my neighbor’s?”

In **Regret to Inform**, widows from both sides speak out, putting a human face on the all-too-often overlooked casualties of armed conflict: the survivors. Intercut with beautiful scenes of the serene Vietnamese countryside and shocking archival footage from the war years, the women's voices form an eloquent international chorus calling for peace. **Regret to Inform** is a powerful meditation on loss and the devastation of all war on a personal level. It is a love story, and a deeply moving exploration of the healing power of compassion.

"Making this film has been Jeff's gift to me," Sonneborn sums up. "It has expanded my understanding of sorrow and suffering, of love and joy. I want people to see war differently than they've seen it before. I want them to look war in the face, to ask themselves, 'Am I going to allow this to happen ever again?' I want people to so deeply realize the humanity of other human beings that they won't be able to kill them."

About The Filmmakers:

Barbara Sonneborn

Director/Producer Barbara Sonneborn has worked as a visual artist since 1973. Primarily a photographer, she has done set design, installation, and a children's book. Her photographs have been exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, many galleries, a one-person show in New York, and are included in many private and museum collections. Her awards include an Academy Award nomination for Best Documentary, the Best Director documentary award at the 1999 Sundance Film Festival, the 1999 Independent Spirit Trueer Than Fiction Award, a 1998 International Documentary Association Distinguished Achievement Award/ABC News VideoSource Award for the Best Use of Archival Footage, a 1998 Rockefeller Film/Video/Multimedia Fellowship, and two National Endowment for the Arts Grants. **Regret to Inform** is Ms. Sonneborn's first film.

Janet Cole

Executive Producer/Producer Janet Cole's most recent documentary for P.O.V., **Freedom Machines** (with Jamie Stobie), looks at disability through the lens of technology. Her other recent credits, **Promises**, **Paragraph 175** and **Heart of the Sea** garnered her Oscar® and Emmy nominations and two Emmy Awards. All had primetime broadcasts and extensive outreach programs. She conceived, developed and supervised production of the four-hour **POSITIVE: Life with HIV** for the Independent Television Service, which premiered on PBS stations in 1996. She also produced **Absolutely Positive** – directed by Peter Adair – which aired on PBS as the premiere of the 1991 P.O.V. season and received the 1991 Distinguished Achievement Award from the International Documentary Association. Cole has specialized in the strategic distribution of social-issue films for over 20 years and has been a consultant for PBS, CPB, the MacArthur Foundation, the Sundance Institute, and many filmmakers.

Lucy Massie Phenix

Best known for her editing of international award-winner **The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter**, which premiered at the 1980 New York Film Festival, editor Lucy Massie Phenix began her filmmaking career on the 1971 Vietnam War film **Winter Soldier**, which received much acclaim in Europe at the Cannes and Berlin festivals, but was largely shunned in the U.S. Phenix was co-director and co-editor of the landmark film **Word is Out** (1978), which profiled the lives of American gays and lesbians. Her film, **You Got to Move** (1985), a feature documentary about community activists in the American South, was invited to the 1986 Berlin Film Festival and won the Ecumenical Award at the International Festival of Documentary Film in Nyon, Switzerland. Phenix's other credits include **Cancer in Two Voices** (1993).

Ken Schneider

Editor Ken Schneider has edited several documentaries for PBS, including **Ancestors in the Americas, Part 2: Pioneers in the American West** by Loni Ding and Frontline's duPont-Columbia-winning **School Colors** by Telesis Productions and the Center for Investigative Reporting. More recent projects include **Lieweila**, a personal history of the Micronesian Island Saipan; **The Return of Sarah's Daughters**, an exploration of contemporary Jewish women's spirituality; and **Making Peace: Rebuilding Our Communities**, a look at community efforts to address the violence in black urban communities. Schneider is currently editing and co-producing, with Marcia Jarmel, **Born in the U.S.A.**, a critical exploration of childbirth in America. He was sound editor and assistant picture editor on the Emmy-winning P.O.V program **Last Images of War**.

Credits:

Barbara Sonneborn, Producer/Director/Writer
Janet Cole, Producer/Executive Producer
Lucy Massie Phenix, Editor
Ken Schneider, Editor
Ron Greenberg, Co-Producer
Megan Jones, Senior Associate Producer
Todd Wagner, Senior Associate
Producer/Archival Researcher
Sari Gilman, Post Production
Supervisor/Associate Editor

Kathy Brew, Line Producer
Emiko Omori, Cinematographer (Vietnam)
Daniel Reeves, Cinematographer (U.S.)
Associate Producer
Nancy Schiesari, Cinematographer (U.S.)
Nguyen Ngoc Xuan, Translator
Todd Boekelheide, Composer
Nathaniel Dorsky, Consulting Editor

Participants in Order of Appearance:

Barbara Sonneborn
April Burns
Lula Bia
Norma Banks
Phan Ngoc Dung
Diane C. Van Renselaar
Grace Castillo
Nguyen My Hien, M.D.

Xuan Ngoc Nguyen
Charlotte Begay
Tran Nghia
Truong Thi Huoc
Phan Thi Thuan
Truong Thi Le
Le Thi Ngot
Nguyen Thi Hong

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Cara Mertes is the Executive Producer of *True Lives*. The series is produced by American Documentary, Inc. Major funding for *True Lives* is provided by the Tides Foundation.

American Public Television

For 42 years, American Public Television (APT) has been a prime source of programming for the nation's public television stations. APT has more than 10,000 hours of available programming including *Discovering the Real World of Harry Potter*, *Globe Trekker*, *Muhammad Ali: Through the Eyes of the World*, *Nightly Business Report*, *Rick Steves' Europe*, *Julia and Jacques Cooking at Home*, *Ballykissangel*, *Brian Jacques' Redwall* and *Sinatra: The Classic Duets*. APT is known for identifying innovative programs and developing creative distribution techniques for producers. In more than four decades, it has established a tradition of providing public television stations

nationwide with program choices that enable them to strengthen and customize their schedules. For more information about APT's programs and services, log on to **www.aptonline.org**.

American Documentary, Inc. (www.americandocumentary.org)

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. Through two divisions, *P.O.V.* and *Active Voice*, and additional initiatives, AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, on-line and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation.

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