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***National Bird* Premieres on *Independent Lens*
Monday, May 1, 2017 on PBS**

Online Streaming Begins May 2

**Three Courageous Whistleblowers Break the Silence Around
the Secret U.S. Drone War**



Credit: Torsten Lapp

(San Francisco, CA) — *National Bird* follows the dramatic journey of three whistleblowers determined to break the silence around one of the most controversial issues of our time: the secret U.S. drone war. Exploring the complexities of drone warfare from a human perspective, the film gives rare insight into the American military drone program through the eyes of veterans and survivors. Winner of the 2017 Ridenhour Documentary Film Prize, the film is directed by Sonia Kennebeck, and executive produced by Errol Morris and Wim Wenders. *National Bird* premieres on *Independent Lens* Monday, May 1, 2017, 10:00-11:30 PM ET ([check local listings](#)) on PBS.

At the center of the film are three U.S. military veterans — Heather, Daniel, and Lisa. Plagued by guilt over participating in the killing of faceless people in foreign countries, each decides to speak out publicly, regardless of the consequences. Their stories take dramatic turns, leading one of them to Afghanistan, where she learns about a tragic incident involving drone warfare. But her journey also gives hope for peace and redemption.

National Bird explores the difficult circumstances faced by military personnel involved with combat drones, the use of which has transformed modern warfare. Missions are highly classified, and there are no official counts of military or civilian casualties. The need for operators and intelligence analysts is increasing, yet their experiences and perspectives have been largely neglected because of their distance from the battlefield. While it may be true that these veterans don't sustain battlefield injuries, their psychological wounds can be substantial.

Pilots and analysts observe air strikes live and in detail, including the aftermath, when survivors pick up human remains for burial. Yet due to the secrecy of their positions, they are prohibited from discussing details of their experiences with anyone — even their psychiatrists. For some veterans these constraints are too much to handle.

National Bird weaves together the stories of two groups separated by thousands of miles: those involved in drone warfare, and survivors and family members of those impacted by lethal drones. The film's haunting images bring a faraway issue close to home.



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Subjects

Heather is a former drone analyst from rural Pennsylvania who was recruited by the Air Force at age 18. After completing specialized training to become an imagery analyst for the U.S. Air Force drone program, she was stationed in the U.S. and worked primarily with Predator and Reaper drones that flew over Afghanistan and Iraq. She participated in her first mission when she was 20 years old.

Daniel is a private contractor and former signals intelligence analyst from rural Tennessee. Following his Air Force training, he was stationed at Fort Meade, Maryland, and worked with the NSA. Later, he deployed to Afghanistan, where he was assigned to the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), the elite organization responsible for killing Osama bin Laden. In Afghanistan, Daniel's work in the drone program as a signals intelligence analyst included tracking down high-value targets for drone attacks.

Lisa, a former technical sergeant on drone surveillance systems, grew up in California and initially joined the military as an army medic and nurse. When it became apparent that she was adept with computers, she transferred to a combat communications squadron, which later became an intelligence squadron. Her final deployment as a technical sergeant was to Beale Air Force Base, California, where she worked on the Distributed Ground System (DGS), a weapons system that makes use of drones to collect vast amounts of data, find and kill targets. Like Heather and Daniel, Lisa had a top-secret clearance.

Participants

Afghan Families (whose names have been withheld to protect their identities) appear in the film to tell personal stories about a U.S. air strike on February 21, 2010. On that day, multiple unarmed civilian families, including women and children, traveled through the mountainous region of Uruzgan, Afghanistan. Mistaking them for insurgents, a Predator drone crew tracked them for hours, eventually leading to an airstrike that killed 23 civilians. A military investigation concluded that the drone crew was primarily responsible for the attack because of "inaccurate and unprofessional reporting." A declassified radio transcript documents their failures.

Jesselyn Radack is the most prominent whistleblower attorney in the U.S. and represents a number of high-profile national security and intelligence community whistleblowers, including Edward Snowden. She heads the Whistleblower and Source Protection Program (WHISPeR) at Expose Facts, where her work focuses on issues of secrecy, surveillance, torture, and drones. She has testified before the U.S. Congress, European Parliament, and Germany's Bundestag. Previously Radack worked at the Justice Department as a trial attorney and legal ethics advisor and blew the whistle on the government's misconduct in the case of John Walker Lindh, the "American Taliban." Radack represents all three whistleblowers in *National Bird*.

Visit the [National Bird](#) page on *Independent Lens*, which features more information about the film. *National Bird* will be available for online viewing on the site beginning May 2, 2017. The film is also part of [Indie Lens Pop-Up](#), the national screening series that offers pre-broadcast sneak previews and discussions of *Independent Lens* documentaries in over 75 cities.

About the Filmmakers

Sonia Kennebeck (Director/Producer) is an independent documentary filmmaker and investigative journalist with more than 15 years of directing and producing experience. She has directed eight television documentaries and more than 50 investigative reports. *National Bird*, her first feature-length film, premiered at the Berlin Film Festival 2016 and was also selected for Tribeca, Sheffield, and IDFA. *Foreign Policy* magazine recognized Kennebeck as one of 100 Leading Global Thinkers of 2016, and she was also selected as one of 25 New Faces of Independent Film 2016 by *Filmmaker Magazine*. In March 2017, the film won the prestigious Ridenhour Documentary Film Prize, awarded to extraordinary individuals “who persevere in the act of truth-telling that protect the public interest, promote social justice, or illuminate a more just vision of society.” In an announcement of the award, the Ridenhour selection committee praised *National Bird* as a “chilling expose of the consequential direct personal and social trauma of drone warfare.” Kennebeck received a master’s degree in international affairs from American University in Washington, D.C. She was born in Malacca, Malaysia, and lives in New York, where she runs her own production company.

Ines Hofmann Kanna (Producer) has worked as a television producer and director in the United States for the past 20 years. She began her career at Boston’s PBS station, WGBH, where she worked for ten years, most notably on the hit series *Antiques Roadshow*. She has also worked as Supervising Producer for ITVS, guiding more than 30 filmmakers from production to broadcast, and acted as Series Producer on two ITVS documentary series, *Global Voices* and *Women of the World*. She now focuses on making social issue documentaries with independent filmmakers from around the world. Ines has a master’s degree in mass communication from Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts. She was born and raised in East Germany.

CREDITS

Director and Producer	Sonia Kennebeck
Producer	Ines Hofmann Kanna
Executive Producers	Wim Wenders Errol Morris Lois Vossen Sally Jo Fifer
Director of Photography	Torsten Lapp
Editor	Maxine Goedicke
Composer	Insa Rudolph
Title Song “National Bird”	Sole and DJ Pain 1



About *Independent Lens*

Independent Lens is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS Monday nights at 10:00 PM. The acclaimed series, with Lois Vossen as executive producer, features documentaries united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of independent filmmakers. Presented by ITVS, the series is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding from PBS, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. For more visit pbs.org/independentlens. Join the conversation: facebook.com/independentlens and on Twitter [@IndependentLens](https://twitter.com/IndependentLens).

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