Military Channel Presents RETURN TO TARAWA, a Documentary Capturing World War II Veteran's Crusade to Preserve a Sacred Battlefield Turned Trash Dump

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RETURN TO TARAWA is Narrated by Actor Ed Harris

SILVER SPRING, Md., March 24, 2009 (GLOBE NEWSWIRE) -- In Military Channel's world premiere of RETURN TO TARAWA, World War II combat veteran Leon Cooper embarks on what he considers his final mission -- to preserve the hallowed ground of one of World War II's deadliest battlefields at Red Beach on Tarawa Island. This battle was the U.S. Navy's first major amphibious assault and over 1,600 American servicemen fell at Tarawa Island, a fortified Japanese stronghold about 2,500 miles southwest of the Hawaiian islands and currently within the Republic of Kiribati. RETURN TO TARAWA documents Cooper's stirring trip back to confirm first-hand the reports of the desecration of Red Beach, which is littered with piles of garbage, rusting debris and possible lost gravesites of servicemen still listed as missing in action. While an emotionally charged experience for the eighty-nine-year-old Cooper, this journey further propels his mission to clean-up and restore this sacred battleground by making it a permanent war memorial for all those who fought and died there. Narrated by actor Ed Harris, RETURN TO TARAWA premieres Friday, April 24th, at 10 PM ET on the Military Channel.

Cooper's first combat experience came in November of 1943 as a U.S. Navy landing craft officer charged with leading a group of Higgins Landing Crafts in the first wave of the Battle of Tarawa. The battle became known as "Bloody Tarawa" because over 1,600 marines and sailors lost their lives and more than 2,000 were wounded over the course of the three-day conflict. Cooper cannot escape the painful memories of seeing hundreds of his fellow countrymen fall around him and now, he lives with the gut-wrenching knowledge that the site of their ultimate sacrifice has become a garbage dump. Therefore, Cooper has dedicated himself to securing the support of the U.S. and Republic of Kiribati in restoring Red Beach to its original pristine condition. RETURN TO TARAWA tracks Cooper's efforts to have his comprehensive restoration plan implemented including building a modern incineration facility, which would relieve the island's chronic issues of refuse disposal. Cooper is seeking the support of the U.S. government to fund this program and establish the beach as a permanent war memorial including moving the Memorial to the 2nd Division Marines from its current location in a parking lot.

During his journey, Cooper meets with non-profit organizations dedicated to searching for the hundreds of U.S. servicemen still listed as missing in action from the Battle of Tarawa. Nearly 65 years later, these volunteers are using declassified documents, archive photographs and ground-penetrating radar to identify and locate what was suppose to be temporary gravesites that still may exist on the island. These organizations hope their efforts will assist the U.S. government in returning the remains of these MIA's to their families and provide these heroes a proper burial back home on U.S. soil.

RETURN TO TARAWA is kicking off Military Channel's History Fridays, which will premiere historical documentaries on Friday nights starting April 24. Weekly premieres after the world premiere of RETURN TO TARAWA include BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC, May 1 from 8-11 PM; TIMEWATCH: HIMMLER, HITLER & THE END OF THE THIRD REICH, May 8 at 10 PM; FATAL ATTRACTION OF ADOLF HITLER, May 15 from 9-11 PM; AMERICAN ARSENAL, May 29 at 10 PM; and FROM GENEVA TO BAGHDAD: RULES OF WAR, June 5 at 10 PM.

RETURN TO TARAWA, www.returntotarawa.com, is produced by Vanilla Fire Productions. For Vanilla Fire Productions, Steven C. Barber and Leon Cooper are executive producers and Tamara Henry is associate producer. For the Military Channel, Jane Latman is executive producer, Deborah Adler Myers is senior vice president of programming and Clark Bunting is president and general manager.

About Military Channel

The Military Channel brings viewers compelling, real-world stories of heroism, military strategy, and significant turning points in history. The network takes viewers "behind the lines" to hear the personal stories of servicemen and women and offers in-depth explorations of military training, aviation technology and cutting-edge weaponry. As the only cable network devoted to military subjects, it also provides unique access to this world, allowing viewers to experience and understand the full spectrum of human drama, courage, and patriotism intrinsic to the armed forces, as well as, the long-held traditions of the military. For more information, please visit military.discovery.com.

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