

Berlinale 66th Internationale
Filmfestspiele
Berlin
Berlinale Special

TEN FORWARD FILMS PRESENTS

from executive producers

WIM WENDERS and ERROL MORRIS

NATIONAL BIRD

You'll never see a city the same.

a film by SONIA KENNEBECK

TEN FORWARD FILMS PRESENTS NATIONAL BIRD A FILM BY SONIA KENNEBECK
A CO-PRODUCTION BY TEN FORWARD FILMS, NDR/DEUTSCHER RUNDFUNK (NDR) AND INDEPENDENT TELEVISION SERVICE (ITS) WITH FINANCING PROVIDED BY CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING
AND SUPPORTED BY DEUTSCHER FILMFÖRDERUNGS, FILMFÖRDERUNG HAMBURG SCHLESWIG-HOLSTEIN AND KOBLENZTRUM JUNGER DEUTSCHER FILM
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY THORSTEN LAPP EDITOR MAKINE GÜEBELKE COMPOSER INSA RUDOLPH EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS WIM WENDERS ERROL MORRIS EXECUTIVE PRODUCER FOR ITS SALLY JO FIFER
PRODUCED BY INES ROHMANN KANNA DIRECTOR AND PRODUCER SONIA KENNEBECK

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NATIONAL BIRD

The Film

Logline

Three courageous whistleblowers break the silence around the U.S. drone war – a decision that changes their lives forever.

Synopsis

National Bird follows the dramatic journey of three whistleblowers who are determined to break the silence around one of the most controversial current affairs issues of our time: The secret U.S. drone war.

At the center of the film are three U.S. military veterans. Tortured by guilt over participating in the killing of faceless people in foreign countries, they decide to speak out publicly, despite the possible consequences.

Their stories take dramatic turns, leading one of the protagonists to Afghanistan where she learns about a horrendous incident. But her journey also gives hope for peace and redemption.

National Bird gives rare insight into the U.S. drone program through the eyes of veterans and survivors, connecting their stories as never seen before in a documentary. Its images haunt the audience and bring a faraway issue close to home.

NATIONAL BIRD

Director Statement

It was Ramadan and we were still six hours away from sunset when we could have our first sip of water. That day, it was over one hundred degrees and no one except a little boy in front of me had anything to drink. But in this very moment, thirst didn't cross my mind. My thoughts and my vision had honed in on the two people in front of me: a father and his son, both dressed in light blue traditional Afghan garb. With a calm voice the man quietly recounted the most disturbing experience of his life. His son, not a year over ten, was cuddled up close, tenderly holding his father's hand.

Over the three days we filmed the family, the boy was never more than a few steps away from his beloved father. The Taliban had attacked the Afghan parliament with a car bomb, only blocks away from us. Maybe he was still feeling the impact from the loud blast that shook all of us up the previous day. But something tugged at me, suggesting otherwise.

We were sitting in a shady waiting room with turquoise walls at a hospital in Kabul, where this man shared with me that he was studying to become a doctor when a bomb from a U.S. airstrike tore off his leg and shattered his dreams. I didn't understand his soft-spoken Dari, but two years into my research on drones, his story was all too familiar.

Military leaders have long aspired to wage war through unmanned weapons systems that kill enemies without putting their own troops in harm's way. Over a decade ago, this vision turned into reality, but much of it was skillfully hidden from the public. As an investigative journalist, I am drawn to secrets. So when I started this project in 2013, I was curious to understand more about the U.S. drone program that had grown so exponentially under the Obama administration and by many accounts had become the President's weapon of choice in the global war on terror. As a firm believer in the First Amendment and government transparency, I struggled with the secrecy and lack of public discourse around such an extensive killing program.

National Bird is an investigative political documentary that explores the complex issue of drone warfare from a human perspective. Through this film, I hope to enliven the public debate not just by enriching the existing discourse with a balanced portrait of the U.S. drone program, but more importantly by illuminating the impact this program has on the people – veterans and survivors – the human side of this war. Like previous advancements in military technology, combat drones have transformed warfare, outpacing the ability of legal and moral frameworks to adapt and address these developments. A broad, immersive, and thoroughly public discourse is critical to understanding the social cost of drone warfare.

From the day I met my first source in rural Pennsylvania to that moment in Kabul where I sat on a wooden bench opposite a maimed man and his son, this project has grown far beyond my expectations. The protagonists have given me intimate access to their stories and lives to educate the public about a weapons program with global implications. I greatly respect their courage and thoughtfulness, but most of all their humanity.

NATIONAL BIRD

Quotes from the Executive Producers

Wim Wenders:

"This is a truly amazing and eye-opening film about the drone program of the U.S. Air Force and some courageous people who realized what sort of threat these unmanned warplanes represent and who decided to speak out about their experiences.

You will see and hear things you've never seen or heard, and you will leave the theater with insight, in the true sense of the word, you did not have before."

Wim Wenders

Errol Morris:

"*National Bird* is a one-of-a-kind film. It's nothing short of miraculous that Sonia Kennebeck was able to secure the cooperation of multiple analysts recently active in the U.S. drone program. The film offers an unparalleled glimpse into the surreal landscape of automated murder.

Who are these people, who sit in windowless rooms and make life-and-death decisions based on blurry images flickering on computer screens? On paper, it's a seemingly smooth, uncomplicated job. Except there's a conspicuous lack of moral clarity about who is targeted and why.

Even if the true identity of the victims is known, *National Bird* reminds us that we're living in an electronic haze, where life and death are decided on the basis of, as often as not, caprice. Detachment and a lack of accountability are rewarded where responsibility and compassion are shunned. For many servicemen, time in service may be little different than a video game gone mad (or come to life)."

Errol Morris

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Background Information

Unmanned aerial vehicles, commonly known as drones, are often considered weapons of the future. Heavily-armed Reaper or Predator drones fly miles above the ground and use their cameras to track human targets for days or even weeks, like invisible stalkers. This image is one the military is known to promote. One U.S. Air Force recruitment commercial starts like a combat scene in a video game: U.S. soldiers are marching through a desert, anticipating an enemy attack. A military drone, operated by pilots in a control room in the U.S., is supporting the ground troops from the air, and targets hostile snipers. The slogan sticks: *"It's not science fiction."*

Combat drones have transformed modern warfare. They are America's weapons of choice in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen. Most missions are highly classified, and there are no official counts of military or civilian casualties. It is a secret war waged by thousands of soldiers, men and women, who are bound to silence. But U.S. government officials, including President Barack Obama, are adamant in their assurances that combat drones are precise and effective weapons that kill verified enemies and minimize military casualties, all while preventing unnecessary civilian deaths. Several NGOs disagree.

The United States is currently the world's leader in lethal drone use, but other countries are also deploying their own combat drones, making global consequences unpredictable. Meanwhile, the U.S. has expanded the use of combat drones to all four branches of the military, increasing the need for operators and intelligence analysts substantially. Yet, the experiences and perspectives of drone operators have been largely neglected, because they are thousands of miles away from the battlefield and don't come home in body bags or on gurneys. While they don't sustain physical injuries, their psychological ones can be substantial.

Pilots and analysts not only observe air strikes live and in detail, but also witness how victims' families come to pick up body parts and bury them. When drone strikes go wrong and civilians are killed, doubts are raised about the accuracy of the overall system, which has great psychological impact on the operators. Due to the secrecy of their positions, they can't discuss details of these upsetting experiences with anyone — not even their psychiatrists. For some soldiers these constraints are too much to handle.

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Production Team Bios

Director and Producer: Sonia Kennebeck

Sonia Kennebeck is an independent documentary filmmaker and investigative journalist who has worked for CNN and ARD German public television's highest-rated and longest-running current affairs program, *Panorama*. She lives in Washington, D.C., where she runs her own production company, Ten Forward Films, that makes films about international politics and human rights. Her previous documentary about the German brothel industry, *Sex - Made in Germany*, was an Official Selection of the Montreal World Film Festival 2013 and the Festival de Télévision de Monte-Carlo 2014. Sonia Kennebeck has over 12 years of production experience. She received a Master's degree in International Affairs from American University in Washington, D.C. and was born in Malacca, Malaysia. *National Bird* is her first feature-length documentary film.

Producer: Ines Hofmann Kanna

Ines Hofmann Kanna 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, the Independent Television Service, 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 Hofmann Kanna has a Master's degree in Mass Communication from Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts. She was born and raised in East Germany.

Director of Photography: Torsten Lapp

Torsten Lapp has 25 years of experience filming and producing investigative news reports and documentary films. He often works on highly sensitive stories and has covered conflicts around the world, including those in Afghanistan and the former Yugoslavia. Torsten Lapp has photographed numerous award-winning documentaries and is best known for his unique and artistic visual style that challenges the technical capabilities of his cameras. He studied photography at the Bavarian State Institute for Photography, and politics, law and philosophy at the Goethe University of Frankfurt.

Editor: Maxine Goedicke

Maxine Goedicke most recently edited Wim Wenders' new documentary *The Salt of the Earth*, which received a 2015 Academy Award nomination and the Prix Un Certain Regard at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival. Her previous documentary *This Ain't California* won the Dialogue en perspective prize at the Berlin Film Festival in 2012, a German Camera Award promotional prize for editing in 2013, and the Nashville Film Festival Special Jury Prize. She has worked with Wim Wenders for many years and was assistant editor for his 3D documentary, *Pina*. In addition to her work in film, Maxine Goedicke also edits commercials for multinational brands.

Composer: Insa Rudolph

Insa Rudolph is an accomplished composer and jazz singer with a very unique voice, who has written and recorded soundtracks for award-winning narrative independent films and theater performances. Her compositions are inspired by unusual sounds and combine the familiar and the unknown to create unexpected new soundscapes. Insa Rudolph is a founding member, musical director and stage musician for the independent theater group *werkgruppe2*. She recently composed the score for director Sonia Kennebeck's documentary *Sex - Made in Germany*.

Executive Producer: Wim Wenders

Wim Wenders came to international prominence as one of the pioneers of the New German Cinema in the 1970's and is considered to be one of the most important figures in contemporary German film. In addition to his many prize-winning feature films, his work as a scriptwriter, director, producer, photographer and author also encompasses an abundance of innovative documentary films, international photo exhibitions and numerous monographs, film books and prose collections. He has directed such iconic films as *Paris, Texas*; *Wings of Desire*; and the Oscar-nominated documentaries *Buena Vista Social Club* and *Pina*. His most recent documentary film, *The Salt of the Earth*, was nominated for the 2015 Academy Awards. To honor his lifetime achievement, Wim Wenders received an Honorary Golden Bear at the 2015 Berlin International Film Festival. He lives and works in Berlin, together with his wife Donata Wenders.

Executive Producer: Errol Morris

Errol Morris is one of the most renowned documentary directors in the United States. His films have won many awards, including an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature, an Emmy, the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival, the Silver Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival, the Golden Horse at the Taiwan International Film Festival and the Edgar from the Mystery Writers of America. Film critic Roger Ebert has said about Errol Morris: "*After twenty years of reviewing films, I haven't found another filmmaker who intrigues me more ... Errol Morris is like a magician, and as great a filmmaker as Hitchcock or Fellini.*" He has received five fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Guggenheim Fellowship and a MacArthur Fellowship. In 2007, he was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

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Credits

Director and Producer	Sonia Kennebeck
Producer	Ines Hofmann Kanna
Executive Producers	Wim Wenders Errol Morris
Director of Photography	Torsten Lapp
Editor	Maxine Goedicke
Composer	Insa Rudolph
Title Song <i>National Bird</i>	Sole and DJ Pain 1
Post Production Services	The Post Republic Hamburg
VFX Services	Automatik
Sound Design and Mix	Basis Berlin
Legal Counsel	Frank Dehn Andreas Pense
Commissioning Editors for NDR	Barbara Biemann Alexander von Sallwitz
Executive Producer for ITVS	Sally Jo Fifer
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National Bird

nationalbirdfilm.com

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NATIONAL BIRD

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