

Medal of Honor winner from Tawas produces documentary on great bravery

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By Eric English

TIMES WRITER

TAWAS CITY - Growing up in the Tawas area during the 1960s, Peter C. Lemon had no idea he would soon receive the nation's highest military award for his valor on a Vietnam battlefield.

But in 1971, the Tawas High School graduate became one of only 3,440 Americans to ever receive the Medal of Honor.

Now a successful businessman and motivational speaker, the 54-year-old Lemon has co-produced a television documentary on four other Medal of Honor recipients.

"There are 129 living recipients of the Medal of Honor, and 100 of them are over age 75. They are departing at a rapid rate and we needed to capture their stories," Lemon said Friday.

The two-hour show, entitled "Beyond the Medal of Honor," airs Thursday on Delta College's Quality Public Broadcasting. Central Michigan University Public Broadcasting will air the documentary at 9 p.m. Dec. 20 and 3:30 p.m. Dec. 26, Lemon said.

Now living in Colorado, Lemon visited friends on Friday in the Tawas area after giving a Veterans Day speech in Detroit to the Michigan chapter of the Paralyzed Veterans of America.

He stopped by the Tawas Bureau of The Bay City Times to talk about his documentary.

"The documentary conveys to our citizenship and youth that character is important, things like respect, dedication and selflessness - the things that make this country strong," Lemon said.

"Viewers who see it will certainly come away with an appreciation of the sacrifice being made by our military right now," he said.

"Beyond the Medal of Honor" profiles four Medal of Honor recipients, whose stories of heroism are told through interviews, eyewitnesses, historians, family members and colleagues. Footage from the U.S. National Archive and their own exclusive photos help illustrate the stories.

News anchorman Tom Brokaw does the introduction for the documentary, which explores in-depth each man's life and the courageous actions that earned them the Medal of Honor.

Lemon said he and his production team spent more than four years and traveled thousands of miles to compile the stories. While he himself owns the Medal of Honor, Lemon said he felt it was more important to tell the stories of the other featured medal recipients.

Yet Lemon said he shares many things in common with the men. For example, each has a small-town background like himself.

Born in Canada in 1950, Lemon moved in 1952 to Iosco County's Alabaster Township, a mining community of 86 people at the time. Lemon's father worked as a mining engineer for U.S. Gypsum Corp.

A 1968 graduate of Tawas High School, Lemon worked four years as a teenager at the Singing Bridge Grocery Store, and spent his childhood hunting and fishing in the area.

He got a job at Saginaw Steering Gear, but only worked there for six months before deciding to enlist in the Army in 1969, where he trained as infantryman and Ranger.

On April 1, 1970, Lemon was serving as a U.S. Army sergeant with Company E, 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division in the Republic of Vietnam.

When his unit's base came under heavy attack, Lemon used grenades, hand-to-hand combat and fired a machine gun in a fully exposed position to fight off the enemy. He was wounded three times, but repelled the attack until help arrived.

He also helped an injured soldier to safety and then refused medical evacuation until more seriously wounded soldiers were taken first.

President Richard M. Nixon presented the Medal of Honor to Lemon in 1971. Lemon dedicated his medal to his unit and three comrades killed in the battle: Casey Waller, Nathan Mann and Brent Street.

In fact, for years afterward, Lemon kept his medal in a shoe box in his closet - feeling the honor belonged instead to his fallen comrades.

Then, in 1995, at a convention of Medal of Honor recipients, Lemon's own children asked him an unexpected question.

"They said, 'Dad, who are all these people?' I said I need to answer that question for them and for everyone else," he recalls.

Lemon began contacting other medal recipients and compiled a series of their personal thoughts and stories into a book he authored in 1997 called "Beyond the Medal: A Journey from Their Hearts to Yours."

The new television documentary is a separate project not based on the book, he said.

Lemon said complete DVD sets of the documentary will be donated to more than 17,500 public and private high schools through funding from the Perot Foundation. The boxed set includes the two-hour television program, plus one additional hour of more in-depth information about each of the four recipients' lives.

Lemon said he plans to visit Tawas High School in January to personally deliver the documentary. Lemon encouraged teachers and others interested in the subject, or who want to obtain the boxed DVD set, to visit www.beyondthemedal.com.

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