

## MEGAN LEAVEY (2017)

- Released by June 9th, 2017
- 1 hour 56 minutes
- n/a (estimated) budget
- Gabriela Cowperthwaite directed
- Rated PG-13 for sequences of violence and action, and some suggestive content
- Warner Brothers, DC Films, Atlas Entertainment, Wanda Pictures, Tencent Pictures, Cruel and Unusual Films
- Produced by José Luis Escolar, Scott Holroyd, Robert Huberman

## QUICK THOUGHTS:

- Demetri Panos
- Marisa Serafini

## DEVELOPMENT

- The movie began on the day that Megan Leavey, the person, walked into LD Entertainment production offices and told her remarkable story. "We cried in our conference room," recalls producer Jennifer Monroe. "It was incredible to see the war from a female Marine's perspective. This took place during a time when women soldiers couldn't be on the frontlines and here's Megan, who's able to go in front of the frontlines because she belongs to the K9 division."
- Leavey's brave story proved irresistible to the producers. They enlisted writer Pamela Gray (Conviction) to meet with Leavey and shape her life experience into a screenplay. Additional rewrites from Annie Mumolo & Tim Lovestedt incorporated characters based on an amalgam of Leavey's real-life comrades.
- Got Your 6, a nonprofit that promotes "normalized depictions of veterans on film and television," honored the film for its realistic portrait of veterans.
- "In all those years when I was working on these Iraq documentaries, I don't remember us interviewing a single female. That's actually kind of unbelievable to me now. And we'd never touched upon a canine, at least while I was there. So for me there were these two fresh portals of entry into a war movie." - Cowperthwaite
- "I was approached by managers and agents," she replies when asked how Megan Leavey came about. "*Blackfish* started striking a mainstream nerve, and I was approached by agents and managers who asked if I was interested in doing narrative." - Cowperthwaite

## WRITING (Pamela Gray, Annie Mumolo, Tim Lovestedt)

- Book: Sergeant Rex: The Unbreakable Bond Between a Marine and His Military Working Dog. It was published in December 2011 and emphasizes the bond between a military service dog and its human partner. Dowling endorsed Leavey's efforts to adopt Sgt. Rex.
- To deepen her understanding of the story, Cowperthwaite spent time with the real-life Leavey. "Reading the script, I'd pictured Megan as this unapproachable warrior, so I was blown away when I met her by how sweet and chill she was," the director says. "She doesn't telegraph what she's gone through. She doesn't see herself as some war hero. She bristles when anyone calls her that and immediately tips her hat to all service members. She never says 'me' she says 'we'. She exudes humility."

## STORY/TOPICS

- Real Life/Movie Version Comparison
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## CAST:

### KATE MARA (Megan Leavey)

- LD Entertainment CEO Mickey Liddell knew exactly who should play the intrepid title character. Emmy-nominated for her role as hard-charging reporter Zoe Barnes in "House of Cards," Kate Mara had previously appeared in Liddell's TV series "Jack & Bobby."
- "I sent the script to Kate and two days later we met for breakfast. She told me, 'I have to do this role. Do not cast anyone else. This is my role. I am Megan Leavey.'" - Liddell
- Mara remembers her gut reaction to the screenplay. "I bawled my eyes out," she says. "The thing I love so much about Megan's journey is that she starts off kind of lost, but when she becomes a Marine and meets this incredible animal she finds her purpose."
- Mara admired Megan Leavey's intensity, determination and unwavering loyalty to her canine companion. "Megan and Rex loved their job and the Marines they protected," she says. "And Megan loved Rex. Nothing was going to stop her from getting her dog back, and she did it with grace and a great attitude."
- "She came in and within five minutes I decided, 'I'm hiring her,'" he recalls. "She knew the script inside and out, she was passionate, she had great empathy for animals and she was interested in the subject of females in the military. Obviously the fact that she was the animal advocate who made *Blackfish* also felt right, so I knew during that first meeting that Gabriela needed to be the director for Megan Leavey." - Liddell
- A devoted dog-owner and animal advocate herself, Mara arranged a meeting with Cowperthwaite through the Humane Society. "Gabriela and I talked about different ways we could continue the fight for animals," Mara says. "I really wanted to work with her because she's one of my heroes, so I suggested that Gabriela direct Megan Leavey."
- Mara participated in a boot-camp-style regimen organized by veteran military consultant James D. Dever. A former Marine whose credits include *Heartbreak Ridge*, *American Sniper* and *Jarhead*, Dever made sure cast members delivered an authentic representation of military procedures. "Anything having to do with the Marines, James helped Kate," says producer Monroe. "She did a lot of scenes wearing actual backpacks, which weigh 65 pounds. Kate's tiny, but she went for it."
- "When I had Rex by my side for those combat scenes, it was unlike anything I've ever been a part of," she says. "The days were very long and very hot and very intense. We shot the war scenes quite early on, which was good because it allowed me to grow really close to Varco. Creating this world together, I felt bonded to him and also to all the guys I was acting with. Under those circumstances, you get to know each other very quickly."
- "Experiencing combat can be very traumatic for dogs just as it is for humans," Mara says. "When they come back from war with PTSD, dogs need to be supported and treated and put in the right space, a caring space. They need to come back to some open arms and hugs, so I want this movie to spread the word about that. And I love how this movie will make you feel so good about this little five-foot-something woman and her dog who saved a lot of people's lives and basically just conquered the world."
- "It was emotionally the most difficult part I've played," said Mara. "Because of the subject matter...It's always a little bit tricky playing real people. Obviously, you feel an extra sense of responsibility for. And I've played real people before...so I've had that experience, but for some reason, this one specifically just felt extra special, probably because when I met the real Megan Leavey, I just felt like I knew her instantly, like we'd been friends, like we grew up together or something."
- "It's an honor to play this person that I admire so much," said Mara, who like Leavey was born in 1983.
- "We just spent a lot of time, as much time as we could, together," Mara told *THR* of working with Leavey. "We just hung out and talked and just got to know each other. The script [answered] a lot of the questions that I had. Anything I was unsure of, I would just give her a call or if she was on set, I would ask her then. She was always very, very open about it."

#### **VARCO** (Rex The Bomb Sniffing Canine)

- "When I had Rex by my side for those combat scenes, it was unlike anything I've ever been a part of," she says. "The days were very long and very hot and very intense. We shot the war scenes quite early on, which was good because it allowed me to grow really close to Varco. Creating this world together, I felt bonded to him and also to all the guys I was acting with. Under those circumstances, you get to know each other very quickly." - Mara
- Filmmakers hired two K9 handlers from the U.S. Marine Corps to advise the shoot in Spain along with two trainers who worked with Varco and his doubles in South Carolina. "Whenever Varco came on to the set, it was like a love fest for everyone in the crew," says Shilaimon. "He was the greatest dog."
- The film Megan Leavey showcases a now-obsolete protocol, which required handlers to leash themselves directly to their dogs while conducting missions. "I knew nothing about the Marines' canine unit before I read the script, so one of the most fascinating things I learned is that back when Megan was a Marine, Rex's leash was directly connected to her vest," Mara says. "When your dog is out there sniffing for explosives and it suddenly runs off, you're kind of screwed, which I know from experience because that happened to me at one point while we were filming. You're very connected to the dog, not just mentally, but physically."
- Mara worked off-screen with Varco. "I helped train Varco to make it look like he was sniffing out explosives by using treats," Mara recalls. "It was just a game for him, but he learned so quickly it was amazing."

#### **TOM FELTON** (Andrew Dean)

#### **EDIE FALCO** (Kathy)

- Jumped at the chance to play Megan's mother Kathy, in large part because of Cowperthwaite's involvement. "I'm a big animal rights person so the draw for me with this movie was the director." - Falco
- "Megan Leavey's real-life father was head of the Teamster crew that worked on 'The Sopranos,'" Falco explains. "For a while, her dad was actually my driver on that show. I didn't know that until after we started shooting and I finally met Megan. She said, 'I met you once when I was a kid when I came on set with my father.' The whole thing was too weird for words but I had this very roundabout connection to this story even before I came on board."
- "For me, the story's about what it means to take care of another living thing. This happens to be about loving an animal. It's an uncomplicated relationship and yet this kind of love can be very powerful." - Falco

#### **BRADLEY WHITFORD** (Bob)

- He found it easy to relate to Bob's concerns and frustrations in trying to help Megan get back on her feet after she leaves the Marines. "You truly are only as happy as your children are," he says. "It's a very difficult to communicate with your own child when they are struggling because as a parent you can get dismissed." - Whitford

#### **COMMON** (Gunny Martin)

- Admires his character's no-nonsense rigor. "Gunny's not an easy person," he says. "He's dedicated to creating great marines so he expects you to live up to your word and he's going to challenge you to do that. For Megan, he's a great disciplinarian and in many ways, a great teacher."
- To nail down the nuances of his character's behavior, Common worked with a pair of Marine consultants. "Our consultants worked with me to get Gunny's perspective aligned correctly, but we didn't want to get into stereotypes. Yes, you're a soldier so you act a certain way, but you were a person before you were a soldier. Those guys helped me feel secure to the point where I could
- "Megan Leavey is not really a war movie," Common says. "It's more about this woman who is trying to find herself through her bond with the dog that she went to war with. It's about the idea

that no matter what you go through to find yourself, it's love that's prevails. You can go to war. You can have a difficult childhood. You can make mistakes. But love is the greatest healer and there's real strength in that."

#### **RAMAN RODRIGUEZ (Matt Morales)**

- Made such a strong impression on Cowperthwaite during a long-distance Skype session that she hired him to play Matt Morales
- Mara says she established an easy rapport with the man who plays her character's love interest. "Raman has this incredible ability to make every line of dialogue seem like he just came up with it off the cuff," says the actress. "He's very natural and comfortable in his own skin, just like Morales. That's one reason the character bonds with Matt so quickly. They have this sort of instant connection." - Mara

#### **DOG SNIFFING FACTS/PROGRAM**

- In 1997, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) launched an exhaustive program to understand the dynamics of how a dog smells and see if they could manually recreate it. The program, called "Dog's Nose," sought to leverage "the components of the canine olfactory system to create a breakthrough detection system." After thirteen years and \$19 billion dollars, the Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization (JIEDDO) failed to improve on nature.
- Part of their superior ability reflects how much of their cerebral activity is devoted to smelling. Scientists calculate that 40 times more of their brain is dedicated to analyzing scents. While we have about six million receptors in our nose to detect odors, dogs have about 300 million. But dogs are also anatomically engineered to filter smells differently.
- A study from Penn State University explains, "When airflow enters the nose [of a dog] it splits into two different flow paths, one for olfaction and one for respiration." While humans use the same air for breathing and smelling, dogs reserve part of their inhalations just so they can sample and analyze the odors they encounter. As such dogs have evolved into finely tuned directional instruments that can distinguish thousands, if not millions, of individual scents.
- Dogs' unique relationship with human beings, however, put them in a class apart when it comes to creating an operational team. It is not enough for a dog simply to have an incredible sense of smell, they must also be motivated and focused for extended periods of time.
- Bloodhounds and Basset Hounds are breeds with arguably the best noses, but neither have the emotional or psychological temperament to do well in the field. German Shepherds, Belgian Malinois, and Labradors have proven to be the top dogs for sniffing out explosives—the first two breeds because of their unwavering work ethic, the latter due to its insatiable appetite for food and play.
- During World War II, the army experimented with using dogs to detect land mines with very limited success. In 1946, the British army trained dogs to police for possible explosives in the disputed area of Palestine. Later British forces applied that same training to root out possible bombs in Northern Ireland. By the 1970s, the United States military started developing clear protocols for training sniffer dogs, techniques that would prove essential when after 9/11 the need for bomb dogs—or Explosive Detection Canines (EDCs)—exploded.
- In training dogs, repetition is the key. Dogs are run through the same exercises over and over again, with each success winning them an emotional or edible reward. While humans might find such rote instruction tedious, the mix of structure and positive reinforcement turn work into an ongoing game for dogs. For bomb dogs, the goal of the game is not to find bombs per se, but to identify the individual chemical elements that go into explosives.
- At academic centers, like Auburn University's Canine Detection Research Institute (CDRI), researchers are developing training programs based on cutting-edge animal science. Recently they have made it possible for dogs to go through MRIs fully conscious so that they can map out how a dog's olfactory systems work at a neurological level. "This lets us see their brains in action when they are smelling odors," one professor explains. The CDRI has also made remarkable advancements in training. In 2005, they worked with the Marine Corps to train dogs to sweep and sniff off leash, allowing canines to patrol areas that might not be safe for their handlers.

- In the last few years, the CDRI has created a proprietary technology called Vapor Wake which allows dog to detect suspect airborne particles, even after the material (and the person carrying it) have left the area. An associate director at the [CDRI explains](#), "In an environment like a crowded venue, the dog can detect the odor of explosives on a moving person and trace the explosive to the source."

#### **DIRECTING** (Gabriela Cowperthwaite)

- The producers were excited to be able to put a female director in charge of a movie about a strong woman. "Gabriela was collaborative and brilliant and a great listener, which partly comes, I think, from the fact that she's a mom and used to juggling a million things at once," says producer Monroe. "There's a huge skillset that comes out of that. She was an amazing director to work with."
- "I come from documentaries and Megan Leavey is based on a true story, so I felt, 'I can do this,'" Cowperthwaite says. "A lot of war movies depict the experience of a male soldier. Very few follow a woman. It was fascinating for me to look at how a woman starts out in boot camp and ends up becoming a Corporal. What did that entail? I was also very curious about the K9 unit. What have these dogs been doing for us during war time? Rarely do movies follow a woman in combat or look at the canine sacrifice, so I saw Megan Leavey as a great opportunity to peel back the layers of that world."
- The director wanted to underscore the physical and psychological sacrifices made by American soldiers. "One aspect of the film that was really important to me to get right is the fact that these men, women and animals experience very dark scenarios and a lot of them come back broken," says Cowperthwaite. "And I think as civilians we're just not entirely equipped to understand what they've been through let alone help them." Megan has PTSD, which is worsened by the fact that she's not with Rex. "It's inspiring to watch her charge back up, remembering what made her join the Marines in the first place."
- So day after day, dogs are taught to identify one element at a time, be it gunpowder, commercial dynamite, TNT, RDX (which is used in C4 and Semtex).
- Their very first lesson, however, is to sit still—the universal signifier for having found something—so that their innate curiosity doesn't prompt them to start digging up areas better left untouched. "We have to fuse three things together in the dog's mind—the odor of the explosive, with a passive response, with a reward," explains one program director at Lackland Air Force Base.

#### **REAL LIFE COMPARED TO MOVIE VERSION**

- Leavey, a former standout softball player during high school, tried college for a brief period before deciding to enlist in the Marines in 2003. "September 11th is the main reason I joined," she said.
- In real life, Leavey's pairing with Rex seems a little more intentional on her part. The real Leavey was assigned Rex as soon as she got to Camp Pendleton. She had gone to Paris Island for basic training and enrolled to become part of the military police, applying to the K-9 unit, where she was partnered with Rex.
- In 2005, they were deployed to Fallujah for seven months and then to Ramadi in 2006. It was during the second deployment that they were both injured by a makeshift explosive device. In all, they served for nearly three years at each others side and completed more than 100 missions.
- In real life, Megan Leavey and Rex were badly injured in Iraq on September 4, 2006 while they were clearing an unoccupied area ahead of five Humvees. After safely clearing the road of four bombs, insurgents watched from a rooftop and detonated a fifth improvised explosive device (IED) as Leavey and Rex approached an intersection (*NY Daily News*). "We had an IED blow up right underneath us on a foot patrol," said Leavey. "That was traumatic. Me and Rex got tossed like ten feet. I was knocked unconscious, bleeding from my ears." Yes. The *Megan Leavey* true story confirms that since the IED was buried too deep, the ground absorbed most of the blast and shrapnel that was meant to kill Leavey and Rex. "Overall it was good, the bomb was buried too deep," says Leavey. "So I was very lucky"

- Megan experienced hearing loss from an exploded eardrum. She also suffered a traumatic brain injury and spent nearly a year recovering and rehabilitating with Rex, eventually leaving the military when her commitment was up at the end of 2007. At that time, she tried to adopt Rex, but like in the movie, the military refused the request. Megan was awarded a Purple Heart for her wounds and heroism.
- Megan Leavey got the attention of New York Senator Charles Schumer, but it didn't happen like it does in the movie, with Leavey approaching Schumer on the steps outside a government building. In researching the *Megan Leavey* true story, we learned that Leavey called Jerry Donnellan, a man who assists with veteran causes in Leavey's home county of Rockland, New York. Donnellan contacted the staff of Senator Schumer. The senator then sent a letter to Michael B. Donley, Secretary of the Air Force, which handles the training of military work dogs at San Antonio's Lackland Air Force Base. In his letter, Schumer wrote of the bond that had been forged between Leavey and Rex, in addition to the countless lives they had saved. He urged the Air Force to allow Leavey to finally be able to adopt combat dog Sgt. Rex. "It's only appropriate and right that the two of them enjoy their retirement from the service together," Schumer commented shortly after the request was approved. He praised the military for "doing the right thing and allowing Rex to be with Corporal Leavey."
- Donnellan is the director of the Rockland County Veterans Service Agency.
- "He's the one that kind of set everything up and pointed me in the right direction. ... We put a whole packet together and that's how that all came about, going to Sen. (Charles) Schumer, and getting out in the press, and making it public, and getting everyone on my side and showing so much support," she said. Leavey said she was careful not to get too combative. "I love the Marine Corps. I don't want to cause a big thing, I just want to adopt my dog. He's not well and I feel like he deserves that care." Donnellan is modest about his contribution. "I saw the bureaucracy she was running into and I helped," he said, by involving Schumer — "the biggest horse in the neighborhood." "My amazing staff helped circulate a petition supporting Megan's efforts that eventually got over 20,000 signatures, and we put pressure on the federal government and the military to expedite the adoption."
- After a tearful goodbye with Rex at the military kennel, Leavey was discharged from the Marines in December 2007, hoping one day she'd see her best friend again. It would take roughly four more years until Leavey and her canine partner were officially reunited in 2012 (she did go to visit him once). The only reason the military let Rex go was because he had developed facial palsy, a nerve paralysis that left him no longer able to function effectively as a bomb-sniffing dog. The story had caught the attention of Yankees owner Randy Levine and his wife Mindy, who helped Leavey bring Rex home
- After not having been allowed to adopt Rex for four years, Megan Leavey was reunited with her former companion in the spring of 2012, when he was discharged from the military and she was permitted to adopt him. They spent eight short months together before Rex died on the morning of December 22, 2012. His best friend Leavey was by his side. She said that she cherished those months she got to spend with him and posted the following comment on her Facebook page: *I am so grateful for the last 8 months I got to spend with my partner & my best friend. Rex got to swim in a pool and play with my other dogs. He got to roam the yard & bark at deer, play with as many toys as he wanted all day every day, sleep in a cozy bed next to me every night, chase and eventually make friends with my 2 cats, enjoy & play in his first snowfall...and so much other great stuff that he would have never had the chance to do if he was never retired. He knew I was with him the whole time and I laid next to him & held him & spoke to him & he was at peace in the end. He is now my guardian angel...even though he already was. So thank you to everyone who supported me & made it possible for me to spend those precious 8 months with my best friend. He was one hell of a dog, one tough ass Marine, and one very special soul.*

## **PRODUCTION/CINEMATOGRAPHY** (Lorenzo Senatore - DP, Ed Verreaux- Production Designer)

- Verreaux: *Billions*, *Jurassic World*, *The Giver*, *Rush Hour 3*, *X-Men: The Last Stand*
- Iraq scenes were filmed in Spain.
- Principal photography on Megan Leavey began October 12, 2015, in South Carolina. In November, production shifted to southern Spain. Re-created Iraq War environments in the country's arid region near the city of Cartagena. "He put together a research department that just dealt with Iraq, and then we had another research department that just dealt with the boot-camp part of Megan's life."
- The scene where Kate gets blown up was a very big stunt piece," producer Shilaimon says. "There were so many moving parts that could have gone wrong, between fires, explosions and injuries. It was four days in the making plus five hours of rehearsals but all that preparation made the action look real."
- "It's beyond anything I could have hoped for," she said, pointing out that the June 5 premiere was well-timed. "We filmed here to the day a year ago, so I guess it seems kind of serendipitous and pretty perfect." While the film shot at Yankee Stadium and features a cameo from the real Leavey, the Marine admitted the filmmakers took some "creative liberties" after she told the writers her story, but she's happy with the outcome.

## **EDITING/VFX** (Peter McNulty)

- Determined to protect the dogs from exposure to loud noises, filmmakers relied on visual effects rather than practical explosions for the film's most violent scenes. "We didn't want Varco [the dog who portrays Rex] to be anywhere near that blast," Shilaimon says. "We didn't want to stress him out or hurt the dog's hearing."

## **SOUND/MUSIC** (Mark Isham)

- Isham incorporates a poignant hybrid score of electronic meets organic. He was one of the first composers to combine electronic/synth with orchestra/live musicians.
- *Crash*, *42*, *Nell*, and *A River Runs Through It*, for which he received a Best Original Score Oscar® nomination.
- Isham was recognized with the Distinguished Film Composer Award at the inaugural Middleburg Film Festival along with a concert by the Shenandoah Conservatory Symphony Orchestra of his memorable scores. His self-titled album, Mark Isham, earned him a Grammy Award. Mark Isham's accolades also include an Emmy award, a Golden Globe nomination and the Henry Mancini award for Career Achievement.

## **PROMOTION**

- The appearance on a stateside TV screen showing Colin Powell's testimony about WMDs provides all the commentary needed about the policies that send soldiers — human and nonhuman alike — into battle

## **BOX OFFICE**

- Total Lifetime Grosses (As of June 12th): \$4,970,088
- Domestic: \$4,970,088
  - + Foreign: \$
  - = Worldwide:
- Domestic Summary
  - Opening Weekend: \$\$3,810,867
  - (#8 rank, 1,956 theaters, \$1,948 average)
  - % of Total Gross: 89.8%
- > View All Weekends

- Widest Release: 1,956 theaters
- In Release: 6 days / 0.9 weeks

## RECEPTION

- IMDB: 7.0
- Cinemascore: A
- RT: 80% Tatometer, 86% Audience
- "Very proud to receive the Got Your 6 certification," Cowperthwaite said. "We all say 'Thank you for your service,' but what does that really mean? In many ways we're just not equipped as civilians to give [veterans] what they need. *Megan Leavey* sheds light on a specific story but hopefully it cracks that issue open a little bit." "Our research shows that due in part to the narratives they see in films and television, most people view veterans as 'broken heroes,'" said Got Your 6 executive director and Iraq War veteran Bill Rausch. "That's why we're proud to recognize projects like *Megan Leavey* that defy stereotypes to accurately portray our veteran men and women as they really are: civic assets and community leaders in small towns and big cities across America."

## SEQUEL/LEGACY

- "I'm really happy," Leavey said in an interview done not far from her Rockland County, N.Y., home. "They did a good job, and I hope people enjoy it." Although the film embroiders the story for dramatic effect, Leavey said, "I think the true message comes through — the bond and partnership between me and Rex and how important it was." The memories are still raw for Leavey, who says that the first time she saw the finished movie, she was "the one in the back of the theater, sobbing." - Real Megan Leavey
- "I'm sure there's somebody else in my shoes somewhere in the military," she said. "If I just put this out there and just help somebody else to be able to get their dog back a little bit easier without such stress, I'm for that."