



Writer/director Michael Connors (FILM '06) and producer Sean Mullin (FILM '06) recently collaborated on their debut feature film, *Allegiance* an independently produced military thriller starring Seth Gabel, Pablo Schreiber, Shad “Bow Wow” Moss and Aidan Quinn. Connors and Mullin are both graduates of the MFA Film program and longtime collaborators. Both have military backgrounds, which connected them to the material and to a network of veterans and ex-military who helped the project get off the ground. *Allegiance* was acquired by XLRator Media and will be released On Demand in December and theaters in January. You can view the trailer [here](#).

CUE: Congrats on gaining distribution for *Allegiance*, which is also just beginning its festival run. Can you tell us the plan for the film’s release?

Sean Mullin: Our film was picked up for distribution after we premiered at the Seattle International Film Festival in June. Our distributors have found that the best way to release an independent film these days is to compress the three major platforms – Theatrical, VOD and DVD – into one tight window. This not only maximizes awareness for our film, but it also allows us to keep our P&A costs at a reasonable level. Our premium VOD release is scheduled for December 7th, our limited theatrical is planned for December 28th through January 4th and our DVD will follow on January 15th. We’ve also just partnered with an International Sales Agent and – assuming our projections for both domestic and international sales hold – we’re on pace to return all of our investors’ equity, along with a solid profit.

You two have been working together on this project for a long time. When did you start collaborating? Was it your common military backgrounds that first brought you together, or your approaches to filmmaking and storytelling? How has the collaborating process worked over multiple projects?

SM: Our similar Army backgrounds definitely helped bring us together, but we also have a very close mutual friend – Brian Reidy – who introduced us right around the time we were beginning the MFA program at Columbia. We weren’t in the same class, but we worked on all of our

major projects together. I produced Mike's thesis film (Recalled) and Mike was the cinematographer for the three films I wrote and directed, including my thesis (Sadiq). Our creative sensibilities aren't completely the same, but there's enough overlap that we're really able to help push each of our projects in the right direction.

Allegiance had an earlier incarnation as the short film, Recalled. Which came first – the idea for the short or the feature? How did the success of the short move you closer to making the feature?

Michael Connors: One of the great things about the film program, and the all instructors at Columbia, is that they really push you to tell stories that come from personal experience. As I was working on a thesis script, the Iraq war was escalating and the Army began to call National Guardsmen to deploy in support of active duty troops headed to Iraq. I went back to my experiences in 2000, when I served out my final year of my four-year ROTC commitment in a New York National Guard unit based in Jamaica, Queens. I learned that my old unit was deploying to Iraq – I found the idea of these 'weekend warriors' going to fight in the Middle East fascinating. I looked for a simple way to approach the broad subject matter, one that I could accomplish in a short film. I fused that idea with an experience I had on active duty, where one of my soldiers asked me for help going AWOL. In order to amp up the stakes, I set the entire story on an Army base the night before deployment. The Recalled short premiered at Tribeca in 2006 and was part of the Columbia Faculty Selects as well for that year. As the film got a lot of attention, I began to see that I really tried to cram too much into the short, and wanted to flesh it out into a feature. I loved the genre angle of the 'prison escape' thriller, and with Sean, we set out to raise money. Having the short was essential to this process. It gave everyone we approached, from financiers to actors, an idea of what we were going for in the feature.

This film is about the “moral complexity” facing today's armed forces, and clearly you both have personal experience to bring to the table. How did that inform the genesis and development of Allegiance?

MC: One of the things that we're most proud of is the fact that we strived to portray the military in its most complex and realistic form. We tried to avoid stereotypical good or bad guys in the film. Often we see military movies made either from a very extreme Left or Right wing viewpoint – where soldiers are seen as victims or infallible heroes. In both our experiences, on active duty and in the Guard, soldiers have complex reasons for serving and equally complex viewpoints on the recent conflicts in the Middle East. They don't fall into the simplistic molds often assigned to them by current filmmakers.

How did the military community become an integral part of the plan to make this movie? (Is it true that you gained funding largely from veterans? Can you tell us about the approach to fundraising from a specific community and how that affected the filmmaking process?)

MC: Many of the investors involved with the film are former military with views spanning the political spectrum. We enlisted the help of ex-military friends during production to bring an authenticity to the film. Despite our condensed production schedule, many of our actors spent time with these folks, traveling to active military bases, with the goal of steering our cast away from the simplistic military stereotypes that are all too prevalent in the current state of films and TV shows. However, we did not gain official support from the Pentagon in making the film. They had issues with several of the more complex elements of the film, mainly an officer helping one of his soldiers go AWOL, and didn't feel they could use the film as a recruiting tool – which is the ultimate criteria which they use to decide which films and television shows to support. As a result, we turned to deactivated military bases (Ft. Totten in Queens and Floyd Bennett Airfield in Brooklyn) which were under the control of the NYC Parks Department. In the end, this was the best possible outcome for making the film the way we wanted to make it.

Allegiance is described as a “military thriller” – how did the thriller genre affect how you imagined the story or how you approached the producing/writing/directing of it?

MC: I love the 'prison escape' genre and felt we could use that structure to help tell the morally complex story of these National Guard soldiers on the night before they leave for war. Many of the genre's elements, especially the use of claustrophobia, fit the design of the movie and helped dramatize the internal conflict of Sefton, the main character. He attempts to rid himself of the guilt of leaving his men at the eleventh hour by helping Reyes escape the base – despite the fact that he knows it's an impossible task. To me, a premise that perfectly fits with the genre.

SM: For me, as a producer, it was important that the film contain some level of commercial appeal. Straight up dramas are tough to sell these days – and so from the very beginning of the process, Mike and I focused on finding a way to combine the art of his vision with the commercial appeal required to finance it.

What's next for each of you? Will you continue to build on the brand of military-moviemakers, or take on something different?

Interview With Allegiance Filmmakers, Mike Connors and Sean Mullin

Written by CUE Editor

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MC: We're hoping Allegiance finds an audience – and one of the biggest reasons is to bring military films and stories back into the spotlight. After graduating from Columbia with the short, both Sean and I constantly heard how difficult it was (and still is) to focus on this subject matter in both films and television. It's such an important part of what this country has been through in the last decade that we hope to continue working on projects that help tell these necessary and moving human stories about the American military.

What's the most valuable take-away from your time at Columbia? Anything you'd do differently?

MC: Unlike most film schools, Columbia's total experience prepares you best to dive into the unpredictable world of Indie filmmaking. You're trained in all the aspects, none more important than story. When you're sitting across from a potential investor, hoping they support your project financially, the most important asset you can bring to the table is the script. Learning how to channel passion and personal experience into one-hundred plus pages is what Columbia teaches from day one.

SM: I'd say the biggest takeaway from Columbia is the importance that the program places on finding your creative voice. It's very difficult to break into this business, but it's nearly impossible if you don't know who you are as an artist.

ALLEGIANCE RELEASE DATE INFO:

Pre-Theatrical VOD: Dec. 7th

Theatrical:

New York City: Dec. 28th (Cinema Village)

Los Angeles: Jan 4th (Grauman's Chinese Theatre)

Austin: Jan 4th (Galaxy Highland 10)