



JAMES McEACHIN ...Nothing More Important Than Being a Soldier

Everyone, it seems, is talking about the online video, *Reveille*, which tells the wordless, unforgettable tale of two older soldiers and a morning flagpole ritual. Try to go through that one with dry eyes!

Then came the sequel, *Old Glory* (now available on DVD), which packs an even heftier punch.

James McEachin, featured in both videos (and producer of *Old Glory*), is hardly a stranger to showbiz. He worked during the Sixties in the music business. He was under contract to Universal during the Seventies.

James is perhaps best known for portraying police lieutenant Brock in the Perry Mason television movie series and Harry Tenaflly, the title character in his own NBC detective series.

He considers what he did before acting much more important, however. As a North Carolina native who spent his formative years in New Jersey, he served in the U.S. Army before and during the Korean War. He was wounded (nearly fatally), requiring battlefield surgery (and additional surgeries afterward in Japan) to save his life. He was eventually awarded both the Purple Heart and Silver Star.

After returning home, he began his acting career on stage, and was soon signed by Universal as a contract actor in the 1960s. He was regularly cast in professional, "solid citizen" occupational roles, such as a lawyer or a police commander, on numerous series such as *Hawaii Five-O*, *Mannix*, and *Dragnet*. He appeared in *Play Misty for Me* (1971) with Clint Eastwood. In 1973, he starred in *Tenaflly*, the detective series about a police officer turned private detective who relied on his wits and hard work, rather than guns and fistfights. During his career, he has worked with such greats as John Wayne, Sidney Poitier, Bette Davis, Clint Eastwood, Henry Fonda and Steven Spielberg.

While he has continued to guest star in many television series and appearing in several feature-length films, McEachin landed his most memorable role, that of



Title Role in *Tenaflly*, the NBC Detective Series



police lieutenant Brock in the 1986 television movie *Perry Mason: The Case of the Notorious Nun*. He would reprise this role in more than a dozen Perry Mason telemovies, appearing opposite the late Raymond Burr. He also played a recurring role in *Matlock*.

In the 1990s, McEachin semi-retired from acting to pursue a writing career. His first work was a military history of the court-martial of 63 black American soldiers during the First World War, titled *Farewell to the Mockingbirds* (1995), which won the 1998 Benjamin Franklin Award.

His next works, mainly fiction novels, included *The Heroin Factor* (1999), *Say Goodnight to the Boys in Blue* (2000), *The Great Canis Lupus* (2001), and *Tell me a Tale: A Novel of the Old South* (2003). McEachin also published *Pebbles in the Roadway* in 2003, a collection of short stories and essays which the author describes as "a philosophical view of America and Americans."

MyBestYears.com caught up with James McEachin to talk about his projects, both old and new. What he shared during that interview was filled with poignant moments and many surprises.

MBY—After all you have done in your career, how did such wonderful, powerful stories as *Reveille* and *Old Glory* come about?

JM—I don't want to take credit for something I don't deserve. I wasn't involved with the creation of *Reveille*. Long story short—I had written a book called *Farewell to Mockingbirds*, and someone related to that project told me about his idea for a film short. I read the script and liked it. David Huddleston's name came up for the soldier who would play opposite me. David was my lieutenant on the *Tenafly* series. As it all came together, we set a shooting date. I stopped by on my way to Washington, DC, to give a speech. We shot the film, and I forgot about it. I was more into doing books, so I really didn't worry too much about any films I was involved with. A year went by, and I got an email from one of our troops in Iraq. He wrote about this great film he had seen , *Reveille*, and how much it meant to him and all his buddies.

MBY—How did the soldier find you?

JM—I'm not really sure. I don't know why the email would have come to me, rather than the film people. Anyway the soldier asked if I could send an autographed copy of the film. I got a couple of copies and send them to Iraq. That led to more and more requests, so I called a friend who suggested that we put it online so the soldiers could simply download it from wherever they were. This was May 28, 2006. The rest, as they say, is history.

MBY—Did you have any idea the film would have the kind of impact it has?



REVEILLE

[Click here to watch the much-talked-about REVEILLE](#) (11 minutes and 30 seconds), winner of "Best Short Drama" in the 2004 Family International Film Festival, "Copper Wing Award for Best Arizona Short Film" at the 2004 Phoenix Film Festival, "Audience Choice Award for Best Short Film" at the 2004 Sedona International Film Festival, "People's Choice for Best Film" at the 2004 Lake Havasu Film Festival. *Reveille* has also been featured at such prestigious film festivals as Brooklyn, Century City, DaVinci Days, Durango, Kansas City, Tiburon and Newport Beach.



JM—No way. I thought it was a nice little film, but I never thought it would stop traffic.

MBY—What kind of numbers are we talking about?

JM—It started out, just with word of mouth, getting fifty hits a day, then a couple of hundred, then a few thousand, then it just exploded. You should read some of the letters I've received. It is incredible the response from the wonderful people out there. It has literally changed my life!

MBY—What kind of letters?

JM—Some of the most heart-felt letters you will ever read. They made the assumption that I was part of the creation of the film, so I got a lot of credit for something I didn't do.

MBY—Why do you think people responded so positively to you?

JM—I supposed it was the character I played. I'm sure David Huddleston has received a deluge of mail, too. There was just something special about the story that played out, even though there were no words spoken.

MBY—Without giving all the story away, do you remember any special things that you brought to the filming that helped make the part so memorable to people?

JM—It's always a creative process when you are shooting. I mainly remember saying that the guy needs to stand here, and that he needs to have a limp, and that he needs to have a certain attitude. Like I said, the script was already done. Hopefully I brought something special to the project.

MBY—People obviously think so. The response has continued to grow. Is that what led to *Old Glory*?

JM—When it got to about a half-million hits, I realized that there had to be a sequel to *Reveille*. I began writing it. I knew how I wanted the guy to be. So I put together my own money to do the film.

MBY—Had you ever directed before?

JM—Never. I had written and acted, but never directing. Thankfully I had worked with a lot of great directors. The directing for *Old Glory* came because I really wanted to make something special and unique, something that really touches the core.

MBY—Making the decision was one thing. Making the film was obviously another. Were there a lot of challenges?

JM—There were a lot of things that come along when you are planning and filming. It got a lot more expensive than I thought it would be. When you are filming, there's an old saying:



[Click here to get information about ordering the unforgettable Old Glory DVD](http://www.mybestyears.com/InterviewSpotlights/McEACHINJames032407.html)



Powerful scene from Old Glory

“Whatever can go wrong will go wrong.” It did. But God really was looking out for me, and it was amazing to see what happened. If I had been an atheist, I would have changed during this filming.

MBY—For example?

JM—So many things. One really simple one was the day we were shooting and had to have the flag waving. Well, there was absolutely no wind. But the moment we had to start shooting, it started gusting all of a sudden. Another time we were shooting in the cemetery and had to get a matching shot to the footage we already had, and the fog machine broke down. Then when we were ready to shoot, this magnificent layer of fog appeared all of a sudden. Everybody was amazed.



MBY—Did the people working on it understand how special *Old Glory* was?

JM—I don't think people did. It's awfully hard when you are crewing or acting on a shoot like this to focus on the end product. I think some realized how special it was, but most were focused on doing a good job and getting it done professionally.

MBY—When did you realize how special it was?

JM—I felt all along that it would be. As we went along, more and more people began seeing it. I really saw it when we were editing it.

MBY—How has the response to *Old Glory* been different from *Reveille*?

JM—Well, *Reveille* now has been played well over a 1.5 million times on the Internet.

MBY—That's incredible.

JM—I'm still flabbergasted over it. On the other hand, *Old Glory* has only been available on DVD for a short while, but even in the earliest showing, people seem to be much more reverential. At screenings of it, I saw lots of tears. People talk about the film having so many levels to it. There's the isolation of the old soldier. Yet he is determined to get the flag. People have responded well on each of the levels.

MBY—Have there been surprises in the way people have responded to *Old Glory*?

JM—I wasn't sure if people would accept the credulity of the old soldier appearing as he does to serve his country one more time in the way he does. Without giving the storyline away, it has seemed to be very believable with the audiences. That has been a pleasant surprise.

MBY—Other surprises?

JM—One was really shocking to me. I got a negative reaction by someone in the military about showing gravestones. Again, without giving the storyline away, it was critical to show these gravestones. We filmed it in a cemetery that has soldiers from battles dating back to the 1800s. It hit me like a ton of bricks that someone would have reservations about showing the gravestones of soldiers, for fear of any negative connotation. I thought, “If we have a fear of showing and honoring these brave warriors, and if the nation really feels that way, we might as well do away with Memorial Day!”



MBY—Obviously you didn't agree, because the scenes are still there.

JM—Definitely. Thankfully that was the only criticism of that kind. Nearly everyone who has seen it has responded so well. It has actually been pretty amazing.

MBY—You mentioned that you witness a sense of reverence for *Old Glory* that was different and deeper than with *Reveille*. What do you mean?

JM—A good example was recent screening in a church in the Midwest. It was very, very touching. It was quite emotional for the people in the audience. I could understand being reverential about God, but it has been quite special to see this kind of feeling about a film.

MBY—Let's rewind and talk about why you wanted to honor fellow soldiers through these two films. How did the military change you?

JM—Had it not been for the military, I would have probably ended up in San Quentin or something close to it. I went into the military when I was seventeen, and I knew absolutely nothing about life. I was a dreadful student in school, but the military helped me grow up and develop the character I would need for the

MBY—You served during the time leading up to the Korean Conflict, right?

JM—Right. I joined the Army and stayed in it for three years, mostly in Japan with the 24th Infantry. I came back to America after I served my time. I was discharged on July 5, 1950, and wouldn't you know it, the day after I was discharged, the Army froze all discharges because of what was starting to happen in Korea. I was pretty upset. I was 20. I had been trained for war. I had learned discipline and regimentation. I had learned to shoot machine guns and lob grenades. And now I was missing it.



MBY—So you re-enlisted?

JM—Absolutely. I got to go to Korea and see some action. I really wanted to be on the front lines. They assigned me to an engineering company, which was the wrong place to put me. I didn't want to be an engineer. I wanted to be in an infantry, so I ended up with the Second Division.

MBY—A tough group!

JM—You see the arrowhead patch even today among soldiers who serve in that division in the Middle East. That was our division.

MBY—You saw a lot of action?

JM—It was fierce. I was finally wounded very severely on a patrol one night and sustained multiple wounds.

MBY—Obviously it was quite a fight. You not only got a Purple Heart, but you also were



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awarded a Silver Star. What is the story about it taking 50 years to get that recognition.

JM—The records got transferred all over and eventually burnt up. Truthfully, I didn't make a big deal about it because I don't feel like I deserved the Silver Star. I was damned good at what I did, but who should have got the Silver Star was a lieutenant who was killed that night. His bravery still inspires me.

MBY—Still, you obviously showed great heroism and your life nearly ended that night.

JM—It was pretty serious. I got hit badly in the liver, spleen, and both legs.

MBY—The thing that seems so remarkable is that you were sent to Japan, and as soon as you could walk, you headed back for the front lines. How did you pull that off? And why?

JM—A blond-haired young man saved me. I never saw him before and never saw him again. He pulled me to safety. I was bleeding from different places. I had been hit with a grenade and Chinese machine gun fire. One of the reasons I went back to Korea after I got operated on in Japan was to try and find the blond guy that saved me. I wasn't there long the second time, and I never did find him.

MBY—Is what you are doing now with *Reveille* and *Old Glory* largely motivated by what you experienced in Korea?

JM—Sure. I look back and during the times when I was doing a lot of films and television, I don't feel like I did enough. I should have done much more of a tribute then to the brave men and women who have served our country in the military. I had a bigger platform then, but I was just so busy with my career and all. I have a great regret about that now.

MBY—Well, you are sure showing them great honor now. It's obvious that you love *Old Glory*. It's more than just another project.

JM—I love *Old Glory*. It's the best thing I've ever done.

MBY—The best of everything over your career?

JM—It's the most rewarding and meaningful.

MBY—MyBestYears.com was created to celebrate and honor people over fifty who are more excited than ever about life. When you say that about *Old Glory*, the last thing you've done, it should give everyone hope that there are a lot more wonderful things ahead for James McEachin.

JM—Oh, my goodness. I feel like I've just put gas in the tank! All the earlier years, I was just speeding up to get on the on ramp.

MBY—What excites you today?

JM—I love talking to people about America and how wonderful this country is. I'm excited about the next email of people who have been moved by *Reveille* or *Old Glory*.

MBY—Will there be a sequel to *Old Glory*?

JM—A lot of people have asked whether there should be a trilogy.

MBY—We vote for the trilogy!

JM—We'll see what happens.

MBY—We've already read some of the comments people have written about both films. It's amazing!

JM—I never cease to be in awe of the great people who write these things.

MBY—Of all the people in our country, you might have a right to be bitter. You almost gave your life in Korea, which was the first armed conflict for our country that didn't produce a clear victory. You served as a minority in the Army. You still carry shrapnel in your leg and the head of a bullet in your chest. Much of what you did was thankless to society. You could easily be filled with rage and hate, yet you seem to have gone about as far as you can the other direction, in terms of patriotism, enthusiasm about our country and a desire to honor those who have served in the military. What made such a difference in the way you have reacted to what has happened to you?

JM—One thing I learned in the Army, early on, was integrity. The military of our country through the years has been built on a sense of integrity. Even though you may or may not like the person standing beside you in a uniform, you were trained to serve together with a sense of pride and integrity. You knew that teamwork and working together could mean life and death. It's more than discipline. It's something almost indefinable. Even at seventeen years of age, I learned that nothing was impossible, that it could be done. I learned that truth and dignity were important. And I learned to love my country, because it represented the best and finest. There was something in all that I learned that tied me to the soldiers who fought in the Revolutionary War and every battle since then. It even made such an impression on me that the first President of our country was also a military man. When the country called him to lead our new nation, he wanted to do other things, but duty called him and he was there!

MBY—We're reminded of the line in your film, *Old Glory*, where the question is asked, "Old Glory, how can I serve you next?"

JM—Right. These guys had already given their lives for our country, yet they are wanting to know what else they can do. America is founded on that kind of integrity and selfless service. The core of our country is built on truth and honor. How can we do anything less?

MBY—What a price some have paid for all.

JM—And the people in our military today are such brave warriors. They should make us so proud.

MBY—So many continue to pay the ultimate price. That's the point of WE WILL REMEMBER—to honor those who have served courageously, past and present. We think it is good to remember the price that has been paid. On a personal note, well over a half-century after you were cut down on the battlefield in Korea, do you still have nightmares?

JM—Every night.

MBY—Looking back over your career, what is the one highlight when you said to yourself, "This is what I was born to do."

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JM—I don't know an answer to that. I've never been asked that. I guess people would think that I would talk about when I did this movie or that television show, or when I was the first Black to have my own dramatic television series on NBC. Maybe that should have been the high point or crowning moment. But it wasn't. Frankly, as much as I enjoyed my acting career, I don't want "Actor" on my tombstone. I want "Soldier!" As crazy as it may seem to some people, I consider what I did in the military and for the cause of freedom infinitely more important than anything I did as an actor.

In 2001, McEachin received the Distinguished Achievement Award from Morgan State University. In 2005, he became an Army Reserve Ambassador, giving speeches on behalf of the military and various veteran's group. This distinction carries the protocol of a two-star general.

Watch for the upcoming special tribute to James McEachin and the Second Infantry Division, at MyBestYears.com's [WE WILL REMEMBER](#) .

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