SDI SUSAN DAVIS INTERNATIONAL

WW1 Centennial Commission

"FIRST ILLUMINATION"

Situation

The World War I Centennial Commission (WW1CC) hired Susan Davis International (SDI) to manage public relations for the World War I Memorial ceremonial unveiling and installation of the commissioned sculpture, "A Soldier's Journey."

The "First Illumination" ceremony also served as the official transfer of Memorial stewardship from the Commission to the National Park Service and the transition of the support mission from the Commission to the Doughboy Foundation. WWICC tasked SDI to create, plan, and execute a visibility and engagement campaign that highlighted the completion of the Memorial and emphasized the Doughboy Foundation's mandate.

Approach

SDI developed a comprehensive communications strategy to address and coordinate the Commission's multiple objectives: secure national and global media coverage for the Memorial; increase visitors; raise public awareness of the Commission's contributions and concluding role, as well as the transition to the Doughboy Foundation for the Memorial's future support and storytelling; and encourage public attendance at the First Illumination ceremony.

SDI reviewed past coverage of WW1CC's events marking America's entry into WWI in 2017, the Armistice in 2018, and the Memorial opening in 2021 to identify key audiences and media outlets interested in the Memorial completion story. With that foundation, SDI developed targeted messaging and comprehensive, multilayered media lists to engage local and national media and audiences, showcasing stories of the Memorial, future plans, and images of the sculpture.

A core strategy was to build anticipation for the unveiling ceremony through a steady drumbeat of media coverage and grassroots outreach to local and regional outlets featuring personal stories of those affiliated with the Memorial.

Outlets pitched included general local, regional, and top national media: newspapers; top digital outlets; military and veteran affairs reporters; broadcast news stations; news bureaus in the nation's capital; syndicated news outlets; photographers; and international outlets. Personalized media campaigns for spokespeople in their home regions resulted in coverage across all 50 states and stories highlighting local connections to the Memorial.

Additional tactics included highlighting significant milestones related to the Memorial, and developing a bank of spokespersons to share the story of the Commission, the Doughboy Foundation, and the sculpture by renowned sculptor Sabin Howard.

Prior to the ceremony, SDI coordinated media interviews with key figures and exclusive access to the Memorial. On the day of the ceremony, SDI secured on-site attendance from major media outlets, including the Associated Press, Washington Post, CBS News, Fox News, and C-Span; and international agencies.

Results

SDI gained visibility for the legacy of WWI, the WW1CC, and the Memorial story in local, national, and international markets. There was massive media attention and within two months, SDI had secured 574 print stories and 805 broadcast segments. Articles appeared in local media in all 50 states, with global coverage through The Guardian, BBC, and outlets in foreign countries, including Argentina, France, Japan, and South Korea. Top outlets included CBS Sunday Morning, CBS Evening News, The Washington Post, Associated Press, Wall Street Journal, Fox News, NPR, and CBS.

Live streaming of the ceremony produced significant media and viewer engagement with media outlets using the footage for coverage. On-site attendance exceeded expectations and local CBS affiliate WUSA live-streamed the crowd during the event.