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CONTACT:

Kellie Rosekrans, Director of Marketing
616.929.1713; krosekrans@grpm.org

IMAGES:

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Grand Rapids Public Museum Unveils a Showcase Display: Veterans Paying Tribute to the World War II Veterans of West Michigan

***Exhibit Opens Friday, May 23, with Free Admission for Veterans and Families All
Weekend***

GRAND RAPIDS, MI - The Grand Rapids Public Museum (GRPM) salutes Michigan's brave veterans with an important new exhibit. *Veterans*, presented in partnership with the Michigan Heroes Museum, honors the servicemen and women from West Michigan who served the United States during World War II. Launching Friday, May 23, this timely exhibit marks the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II and invites the community to reflect on the service, sacrifice, and legacy of the Greatest Generation.

The GRPM proudly participates in Blue Star Museums, a national initiative offering free admission to currently serving U.S. military personnel and their families. In celebration of the exhibit opening, the Museum will extend free admission to all veterans—active or retired—and their families from Friday, May 23 through Sunday, May 25. This offer includes those serving in the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, National Guard, Reserves, U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, and NOAA Commissioned Corps, along with up to five family members.

Veterans highlights the extraordinary personal stories of five West Michigan veterans who served in World War II. Visitors will see rare artifacts, uniforms, photographs, and handwritten documents that bring these powerful narratives to life. Some of the stories featured span from the fierce battles of Iwo Jima to the skies over Europe, from prisoner-of-war camps in the Pacific to the liberation of Nazi concentration camps in Germany.

"It is important to remember and honor anniversaries like this," said Alex Forist, GRPM's Chief Curator. "This exhibit is an opportunity for the museum to honor the bravery of our local heroes and to connect new generations with the personal histories behind one of the most pivotal moments in modern history."

Featured veterans include:

Major Eleanor Garen**U.S. Army Nursing Corps - Fennville, Michigan**

Eleanor Garen served as an Army nurse in the Philippines during World War II, treating wounded soldiers under fire in Bataan and Corregidor. Captured and held as a prisoner of war for over three years, she was liberated from Santo Tomas in 1945.

Tech5 Virgil W. Westdale**U.S. Army - White Pigeon, Michigan**

Born Virgil Nishimura, he changed his name to avoid anti-Japanese discrimination. Serving with the all-Nisei 442nd Regimental Combat Team, he fought in Europe, helped liberate Dachau, and was part of the most decorated unit of the war.

SGT Clay W. Reeves**U.S. Marine Corps - Owosso, Michigan**

Clay Reeves fought at Iwo Jima with the 5th Marine Division, where he earned a Silver Star and three Purple Hearts for his bravery under fire. Wounded in action, he was evacuated and discharged shortly after the war's end.

Chief Boiler Tech James Cox**U.S. Navy - Kalamazoo, Michigan**

Jim Cox was one of 47 sailors stationed on Wake Island during its defense in 1941. Captured by the Japanese, he spent nearly four years as a POW before liberation in 1945.

Major Michael G. H. McPharlin**Royal Air Force / U.S. Army Air Corps - Hastings, Michigan**

Michael McPharlin joined the British RAF before America entered WWII, later transferring to the U.S. Army Air Corps. He flew combat missions over Europe and was killed in action during a sortie over France on D-Day, June 6, 1944.

Artifacts on display include personal items, military gear, and historical documents, such as a preserved Blue Star Service Banner from Grand Rapids mother Mary Platte—whose three sons all served overseas during WWII and returned home safely.

This exhibit is part of a larger statewide effort led by the Michigan Heroes Museum titled “Greatest Generation Celebration: Honoring the 80th Anniversary of the End of World War II.” As part of this commemorative event, communities across Michigan are coming together to pay tribute to the millions of Allied service members, patriots, and citizens who helped secure the victory.

“We are honored to partner with the Grand Rapids Public Museum to bring these stories to a broader audience,” said John Ryder, Executive Director of the Michigan Heroes Museum. “Our veterans deserve to be remembered not just in history books, but in the hearts and minds of every visitor who walks through these doors.”

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About the Grand Rapids Public Museum

The Grand Rapids Public Museum is a 170-year-old, publicly-owned institution home to more than 250,000 unique artifacts that tell the history of Kent County and beyond. Funded in part by Kent County taxpayers through a 10-year millage (2016), the Grand Rapids Public Museum offers three floors of exhibits, the region's only planetarium, extensive educational offerings, and protection of The Mounds, a National Historic Landmark. The Grand Rapids Public Museum is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums, with its primary location in downtown Grand Rapids, MI at 272 Pearl Street, NW. For additional information including hours of operation, admission fees including Kent County discounts, and exhibit/event listings, visit grpm.org.

About the Michigan Heroes Museum

Celebrating their 50th anniversary, the Michigan Heroes Museum, based in Frankenmuth, MI, has been sharing heroes' stories since 1975. Their mission is to Honor, Respect and Remember Michigan citizens' personal contribution to our nation's military and space programs. The Heroes Museum boasts one of the largest collections of Congressional Medals of Honor in the world, along with uniforms, medals, and personal items from Michigan service members and astronauts. In addition to firsthand accounts of heroism, sacrifice, and service there are nearly 1000 stories in regular rotation with over 150 personal displays at any given time. These stories include all branches of service including NASA astronauts. Every day, the Michigan Heroes Museum shares personal stories of heroism, leadership and sacrifice of ordinary Michigan men and women thrust into extraordinary circumstances. For more information, visit www.miheros.org