

B R E A K I N G I C E



A Defending Democracy Production



“I believe their stories have the power to inspire us, not only to recognize what they do for our country, but to think more deeply about what it means to serve, protect and stand up for those values in our own communities.” 🖤

-Mary Ellen Scherl, Filmmaker

Breaking Ice

A FILM BY MARY ELLEN SCHERL

A documentary short filmed aboard the **USCGC HEALY** on a three-week Arctic deployment.

Every mission is real.

Every outcome is unknown.

Every woman earned her place

13:26 | Documentary | United States

Mary Ellen Scherl

Director / Producer

Breaking Ice is a film production of **Defending Democracy: Portraits of U.S. Military Women on Canvas and Film**, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. usmilitarywomen.org

PRESS CONTACT

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OFFICIAL TRAILER

<https://youtu.be/RB6qmySpCyA>

Breaking Ice has aired on WPBT and WXEL, South Florida Public Television Stations

SOCIAL / WEB

Defending Democracy.
usmilitarywomen.org.

Instagram
[sisters.in.arms.us](https://www.instagram.com/sisters.in.arms.us)

Facebook

Defending Democracy: Portraits of U.S. Military Women

LOGLINE

Set in the vastness above the Arctic Circle, *Breaking Ice* reveals the human stories of women serving aboard the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Healy, America's largest icebreaker, as they navigate missions at the intersection of national security, scientific research and exploration.

SYNOPSIS

Aboard America's largest icebreaker, women serve alongside their fellow crew members on a months-long mission through the isolation, danger, and uncertainty of the Arctic.

Commanding the USCGC *Healy*, Captain Kristen Serumgard and members of her crew share their lives and experiences at sea as they carry out demanding missions in one of the most remote and unforgiving places on Earth.

The Arctic offers little margin for error. Will the ship suffer another mechanical fire or failure? How will the crew handle the isolation? Will the Captain fulfill her mission? In a place so remote that emergencies must be handled on board... or else... every challenge carries real consequences.

Through intimate, observational filmmaking, *Breaking Ice* brings audiences inside the mission and into the lives of the women carrying it out. We see the demands of leadership, the realities of life at sea, the pressure of uncertainty, and the bonds that form among a crew operating far from home.

There are no reenactments. No manufactured drama.

No one knows how the story ends until the mission does.

ABOUT THE FILM

Women serve in some of America's most demanding military roles. They navigate Arctic ice. Fly rescue missions into storms. Train allied forces overseas. Operate in conditions most civilians will never experience.

Yet their stories have rarely been seen from **inside the mission itself**.

For six years, Mary Ellen Scherl has built relationships within the Department of Defense and the military services to create respectful, observational film about women performing demanding operational roles. Her unprecedented access, joining the *Healy* for a three-week Arctic deployment, delivers a glimpse into a world most civilians will never experience.

Breaking Ice is the pilot for *Sisters in Arms*, a documentary series honoring and recognizing how women are critical to the strength of our U.S. Armed Forces. Every episode begins with a real military mission. Rather than reconstructing events after they happen, Scherl's camera enters each situation as it unfolds. **The objective is clear. The outcome is not.**

The result is not a story about women as symbols.

It is a film about women **doing the work**.

MISSION / FEATURED PARTICIPANTS

The USCGC *Healy* is the United States Coast Guard's largest icebreaker and one of the most capable polar research vessels in the world. During deployment, its crew operates above the Arctic Circle where distance, weather, ice, mechanical reliability, and isolation can transform ordinary problems into serious challenges. Far from immediate outside assistance, they must rely on their training, equipment, leadership, and one another.

CAPTAIN KRISTEN SERUMGARD, Commanding Officer, USCGC *Healy*

For CAPT Serumgard command means carrying responsibility not only for the *Healy* and the successful execution of its missions, but also for the people entrusted to her.

Operating in one of the world's most demanding environments on Earth, Serumgard has a lot to navigate; the enormous pressure of command, arctic conditions, the constant safety and morale of her crew, and nightly cell phone calls to Jack, her seven-year-old son.

"What keeps me up at night is thinking about all the ways I failed that day."

CHIEF PETTY OFFICER JULIA KINNEY

Seasoned crew member of nearly 25 years, CPO Kinney provides an intimate perspective on life aboard *Healy*. In charge of nearly everything on deck, she handles the demands of operating a highly trained team in the Arctic with confidence and her brand of humanity.

ENSIGN RAILEYANN WESTERVELT

Recent Coast Guard Academy graduate Ensign Westervelt, never seen without her books, studies for her quals whenever she has a moment. She brings a younger, wide-eyed and enthusiastic perspective on service, contributing to the film's portrait of the women carrying out the mission.

LIEUTENANT GIOVANNA LESSER

Arctic environmental scientist, Lieutenant Lesser represents another essential dimension of the mission: the scientific work taking place within one of the world's most rapidly changing environments.



DIRECTOR / FILMMAKER

MARY ELLEN SCHERL

Director | Producer | Artist

Mary Ellen Scherl is a filmmaker, artist, and founder of **Defending Democracy: Portraits of U.S. Military Women on Canvas and Film**, a nonprofit dedicated to honoring and recognizing the mission-critical contributions women make to the defense of our country.

Scherl came to filmmaking through an unconventional doorway. After earning a BFA in Advertising and Design and after spending many years on Madison Avenue, she left the corporate world to pursue a career as an artist.

Her work has long centered on women and their experiences.

In 2020, she founded **Defending Democracy** in response to her growing concerns about the country's increasingly divisive political landscape and threats to democratic institutions.

What began as a portrait project evolved into a larger multimedia documentary initiative.

Since 2021, Scherl has built relationships within the Department of Defense and the military services to gain the trust and access to film women serving in demanding operational roles.

Her first major documentary project, ***Breaking Ice***, was filmed mostly during a three-week deployment aboard the USCGC *Healy*. Other locations included the Coast Guard Academy, onboard the USCGC Mackinaw and at USCG Base Seattle.

Her filmmaking approach is observational, intimate, cinematic, and grounded in respect for the people and missions she documents.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

"I began this project painting portraits of women who serve in the U.S. Armed Forces."



"I **wanted to see them as they truly are**, not as symbols, statistics, or victims, but as leaders, innovators, problem-solvers, professionals, and patriots. Women who have chosen to serve, and who are willing to risk their lives to protect and defend the precious freedom and democracy we share as Americans.

I believe their stories have the power to inspire us not only to recognize what they do for our country, but **to think more deeply about what it means to serve, protect, and stand up for those values in our own communities.**

The more time I spent with these women, the more I realized that a portrait could only reveal part of the story. To understand who they are, and what their service truly demands, I needed to see them **doing it**. That realization led me to filmmaking.

It takes time to build the relationships and trust necessary to enter their world holding a camera. Through an intimate and observational approach, audiences can experience these women directly, rather than being told what to think about them.

Aboard the *Healy*, I was privileged to spend three weeks living alongside the crew during an Arctic deployment. I witnessed not only the extraordinary demands of their work, but also the

quieter moments: the relationships, responsibility, and humanity that exist behind the uniform. What fascinated me most was that I didn't know what was going to happen next. Neither did they. That became the foundation for ***Sisters in Arms***, our new documentary series."

"Every mission is real. Every outcome is unknown.
And the women carrying out these missions are not supporting
characters in the story of America's defense.
They are mission-critical to it."

Mary Ellen Scherl / Director, ***Breaking Ice***

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Title	<i>Breaking Ice</i>
Genre	Documentary / Short Film
Runtime	13:26
Country of Origin	United States
Language	English
Aspect Ratio	16:9
Format	Digital
Filming Location	Arctic / USCGC <i>Healy</i>
Deployment	Three-week Arctic deployment
Director	Mary Ellen Scherl
Producer	Mary Ellen Scherl
Cinematography	Daniel Oliveras, Mary Ellen Scherl
Editing	Sorin Pavelesco
Production Company	Defending Democracy: Portraits of U.S. Military Women on Canvas and Film

PRODUCTION

FILMED ABOARD THE USCGC *HEALY*

Breaking Ice was filmed mostly during a three-week deployment aboard the USCGC *Healy* above the Arctic Circle.

The film represents an unusual level of access to women serving within the Coast Guard.

Filming took place on board the 16,000 ton 420' icebreaker where conditions, schedules, and mission requirements could change without warning.

That unpredictability is part of the film.

PRESS & AWARDS

Official Festival Selections

- Los Angeles Women in Film Festival, 2026
- Sarasota Film Festival, 2026
- New Filmmakers Los Angeles, 2026
- Hollywood Shorts Fest, 2026
- FilmGate Festival, 2026
- Stay Gold Film Festival, 2026

Festival Awards

- Cinematography / FilmGate Festival
- Honorable Mention / Hollywood Shorts Fest

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

Mary Ellen Scherl is a filmmaker and multimedia artist whose work explores women's experiences and their role in society.

With a BFA in Advertising and Design from Washington University, Scherl spent 17 years in advertising, including 15 years at Young & Rubicam, before leaving Madison Avenue to pursue art.

Her work evolved from painting and sculpture into photography, writing, and documentary filmmaking.

She founded **Defending Democracy: Portraits of U.S. Military Women on Canvas and Film** to honor the contributions of women serving in the United States military and to bring their experiences to a broader public.

Breaking Ice is the first film in the *Sisters in Arms* documentary initiative.

THE BIGGER STORY

Breaking Ice begins with an icebreaker in the Arctic. But ultimately, it is about something larger. It is about what happens when we move beyond the familiar image of women in uniform and into the reality of what they actually do.

They command ships. They solve problems. They make decisions under pressure. They endure isolation. They keep missions moving forward. And they do it alongside the men with whom they serve.

Sisters in Arms seeks to bring those stories into the public record. Not after the mission. Not through reenactment. But **from inside the mission itself.**

Real women. Real military missions. Real consequences. Unknown outcomes.

Breaking Ice is where the journey begins.

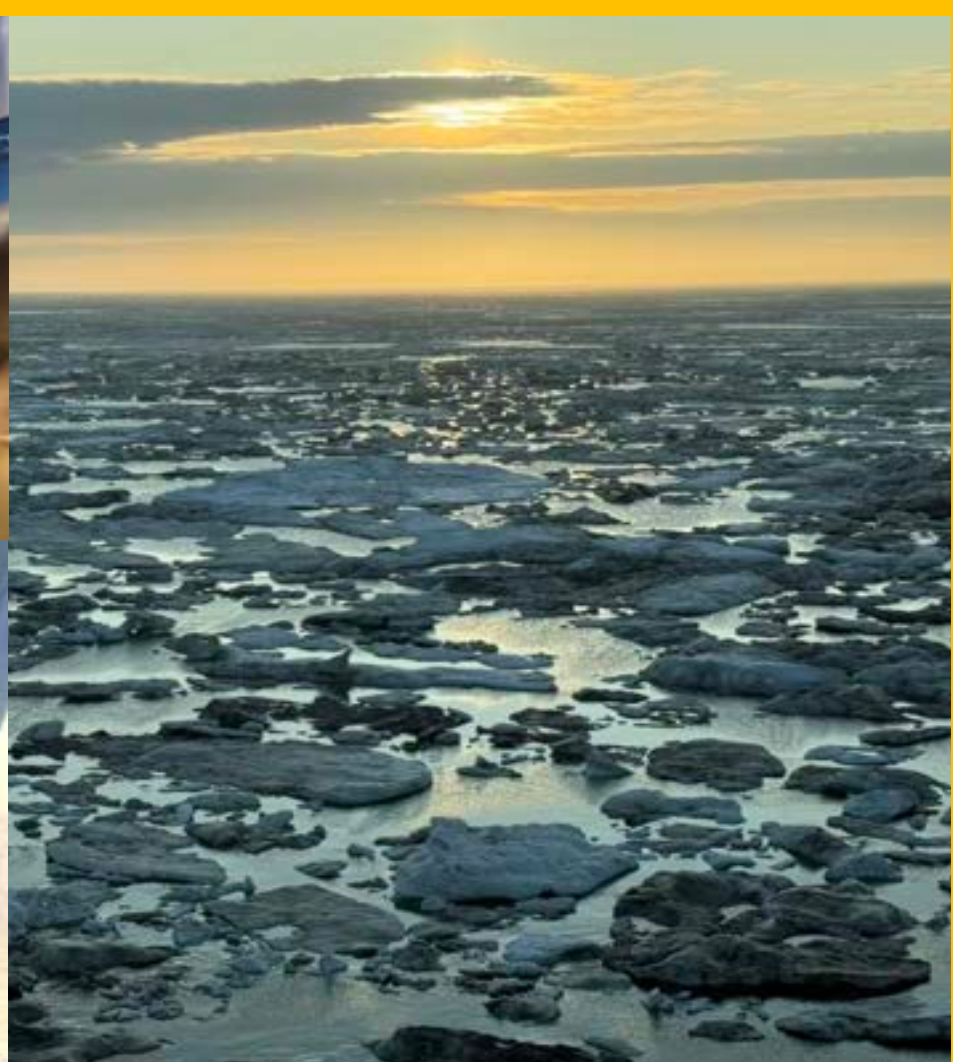


Stills from the shoot













Behind the scenes





Defending Democracy Logo

