



An Exeter Festival Chorus Production

WE WERE THERE

a film of WWII experiences
seen through British, German and Russian eyes

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by Devon County Council Education Department for use in schools

Teachers' Notes

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(to be used in conjunction with the website www.ww2wewerethere.org.uk)

The DVD 'We Were There' tells us about the experiences and memories of ordinary people in Britain, Germany and Russia who lived through the Second World War.

The DVD lasts about forty minutes and is divided into ten sections dealing with various aspects of the war-time experience. Each section is introduced by pupils from Devon schools asking their own questions of the war-time generation.

Background to the 'We Were There' project - in 2005, three choirs from Britain (*Exeter Festival Chorus*), Germany (*Hanauer Kantorei*) and Russia (*Glas Choir, Yaroslavl*) joined together to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the ending of World War Two with combined performances of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem* in each of the three countries. As a means of commemorating the end of the war for the children of the county, the EFC decided to film and produce a DVD to be circulated to all Devon schools with pupils at KS2 and above.

The DVD could be used as useful source material for teaching at late Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3, or beyond. It could be used in a range of curriculum areas, in particular History, English, Music and PSHE/Citizenship. The website www.ww2wewerethere.org.uk contains the appendices 'A Matter of Conscience' and 'The Literature of the Second World War' which provide useful comparative material as well as indications of further sources. This website also provides some music notes on the *War Requiem*.

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DVD Section Headings

1 Title and introduction

We were no more than children, really. I joined up as a fighter pilot at seventeen and a half. We were itching to get into action.

2 Evacuation and shelters

The whole primary school was evacuated. When we got to Exeter Central Station, it was a bit like a slave market, they picked which one of us they wanted.

It smells and it's damp and the noise and everything.

3 Action and apprehension

[The German planes] shot out to sea, dropped their bombs on Exmouth, the Spitfire followed them and we breathed a great sigh of relief.

It was like watching a football match and in an awful way it was exciting.

4 Air raids

I hit the ground in excess of 300 miles an hour when I was shot down. Using a makeshift compass I found my way out and later discovered I had run through a German mine-field.

You held your breath and hoped they weren't coming near you. (England)

I still hear the sounds of aircraft flying at a great height. (Germany)

5 Food rationing

We got 400 grams of spiced bread per month. (Russia)

6 Danger in action

You couldn't grieve for them, even your best friend... you had to be on top form all the time.

7 Churchill

We looked up to him and listened to every word he said. We said we would never surrender.

8 Bombing from above and below

Ninety-seven of our Lancasters were shot down that night over Nuremberg

Every time there was a knock at the door, you thought, was this it?

9 Coping with loss

You had to grow a hard skin in order to survive. My hard skin took fifty years [to break down] and now I can't stop crying.

10 Conscience and consequences

War is the folly of man, the destruction of one's own kind. Language keeps us apart but we all belong to the same race and we should try to help each other and not destroy. Will it ever change?

The dreadful moment for me was always when you had dropped your bomb load and were heading for home. You looked back at that blazing inferno growing smaller and smaller as you flew away. The feeling of depression and awe and disgust. All those poor people, women and children and old people – burned alive – we did that. Why did we do it? How could we have done it?.....But it had to be done.

Key Stage Two – suggestions for use of the DVD (for English, History or PSHE)

Use one or two selected clips in a lesson:

- * **Watch**
- * **Discuss**
- * **Respond**

A useful follow-on exercise, either as discussion or as individual written work might be for the pupils to consider the following questions:

1. What is the most important thing that I have learned from this extract?
2. How do I feel about it?
3. What am I going to do about it? For example: how can I, in my every day life, and in my relationships with others help build a community where conflict can be resolved without resort to violence?

Teachers might wish to conclude these sessions with a thoughtful, reflective time as the children listen to appropriate music, eg

Hymn to the Fallen – John Williams (Saving Private Ryan)
 Smooth Classics for Rough days CD2 Track 11
Captain Correlli's Mandolin – Stephen Warbeck
 Classical Chillout Gold CD1 track 6
Warsaw Concerto – Richard Adinsall
 Classic FM Hall of Fame Track 1
Mars: the Bringer of War from the *Planet Suite* – Holst
Venus: The Bringer of Peace from the *Planet Suite* – Holst
Fanfare for the Common Man – Aaron Copland
Schindler's List CD – John Williams Itzhak Perlman (particularly track 1)
 Requiems: Mozart, Rutter, Fauré, Britten
Adagio – Samuel Barber

It may also be useful for the children to do a reflective drawing as they listen to the music as a way of coming to terms with the different emotions which might have come to the fore whilst watching and discussing the extract from the DVD.

Key Stage Three or beyond – suggestions for use of the DVD (for English, History or PSHE)

Section A: Two suggestions for follow-up work to individual sections of the DVD, with elements of discussion and individual response:

1 To Fight or not to Fight?

...it was the most exciting thing we had ever done... we were itching to get into action...Itching to get killed? We didn't think about that... We were no more than children, really...

These are the words near the beginning of the video of a man who joined up as a fighter pilot at seventeen and a half, in other words not very much older than you are at the moment.

Either as a whole class activity or in your small groups, discuss what your response to the outbreak of war might have been and how you might feel about the call to fight, i.e. take up arms. Would you:

- Fight if you felt it was a just war, i.e. defeating a fascist dictator like Hitler
- Help the war effort but in a non-combative role, i.e. by working as a nurse or in agriculture
- Refuse to take any part in the war on grounds of conscience?

Discuss the above positions and see if you can come to a conclusion about which one you might adopt.

Then respond by means of one of the following activities:

1. Writing a letter to your mother explaining to her what your decision is and why you came to the conclusions you did
2. Write a letter to the Minister of Defence (you will find both his name and address on the Government website) explaining your decision and giving your reasons for reaching it
3. Write a poem which describes how you feel about the decision you have reached and / or what your reactions are to the war ahead.

2 Being Evacuated

The whole primary school was evacuated. When we got to Exeter Central Station, it was a bit like a slave market, they picked which one of us they wanted....

- 1 Write a short story depicting arriving at Exeter Central Station. You might write it either in the first person, i.e. as if you were experiencing the situation or in the third person, as it happens to someone else. Include some or all of the following:
 - ❖ Who picked you? What did they look like? Did you like the look of them?
 - ❖ Where did they live? Was it similar to your home or very different?
 - ❖ Describe the house-hold and how you felt during your first week there. After three months did you feel the same or different? Did anything of particular importance happen during your time there?
- a. Write a letter to your grandparents telling them how you were getting on and how you liked it where you found yourself.

Section B: Topics for discussion based on watching the whole DVD

1 The Conduct of War

...the dreadful moment for me was always when you had dropped your bomb load and were heading for home. You looked back at that blazing inferno growing smaller and smaller as you flew away - the feeling of depression and awe and disgust. All those poor people, women and children and old people – burned alive – we did that. Why did we do it? How could we have done it?..... But it had to be done.

Towards the end of the video a Lancaster bomber crew member said these words. The second world war was seen as a just war fought to defeat a dictator and a regime which held human life to be cheap. Were the Allies right in bombing civilian targets? The Germans also bombed civilian targets - why did both sides do it? What are the rights and wrongs of doing so, do you feel?

The discussion could be broadened by looking at the bombings of Guernica (1937, Spanish Civil War) and of Hiroshima/Nagasaki in 1945 that brought an end to WWII. Among very many other sites there are www.pbs.org/treasuresoftheworld/guernica/gmain.html and www.doug-long.com/hiroshim.htm

2 The Response to War

Since I believe that there is in every man the spirit of God, I cannot destroy human life...the whole of my life has been devoted to acts of creation (being by profession a composer) and I cannot take part in acts of destruction.

Discuss these words of Benjamin Britten. What, in your opinion, were the rights and wrongs of acting as a conscientious objector? (For some relevant, detailed notes on Britten, his life and his beliefs go to www.w2wewerethere.org.uk)

3 The International Situation - Then and Now: Resolving Conflict

Discuss in small groups or as a whole class discussion whether you feel there are any parallels with the international situation of today. Do you feel international conflict can be resolved without resort to violence and if so, how? Can you think of any alternatives to war when international conflicts remain unresolved?

History notes for Key Stage Three and beyond - linked to direct quotes from the film (indexed by DVD section headings)

1 Title and introduction

The most ordinary people did the most extraordinary things

The Second World War was 'total war'. Never before had there been such complete civilian involvement in a war effort. For this reason the Second World War has often been characterised in Britain as 'the people's war.' On the balcony of Buckingham Palace the day victory over Nazi Germany was finally announced, Churchill told the crowd, 'this is *your* victory'.

The First World War had been fought for 'King and Country', but the Second World War was different. Many of the 'ordinary people' who had lived through the 1914 – 18 war still felt betrayed by the political establishment. There were also deep feelings of resentment that once again politicians had managed to get the British people embroiled in another European war.

'Ordinary people' accepted that the war had to be fought and understood the reasons, but there was none of the excitement and jubilation at the outbreak of this war that there had been in 1914.

I had to wait until I was seventeen and half before I could volunteer

Conscription was reintroduced on April 27th 1939. There was an age limit of twenty, raised to twenty-seven on January 1st 1940.

It was an automatic decision that I would join the air force

The Royal Air Force had been formed on 1st April 1918 in response to German air raids over London in 1917.

2 Evacuation and shelters

We knew we were going to be evacuated

The first children to be evacuated left London on September 1st 1939, the day on which the German army invaded Poland. The main bulk of evacuees left for the safety of the countryside on the 2nd September, the day before Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain gave the news to the British people in a radio broadcast at 11:15 am that Britain was at war with Germany

The whole school was going to be evacuated

This had been the practice in England but not in Scotland. Children, who were often accompanied by their teachers, said goodbye to their parents on the railway platforms and left for the countryside, many of them for the first time, with their entire school. Children evacuated from Glasgow went with their parents. A total of three million children were evacuated from London and other major cities.

We were packed off with our gas masks

Everyone had been issued with free gas masks in September 1938. Children were given red and blue 'Mickey Mouse' masks. There had been widespread fears that the German Air Force or Luftwaffe (translates as 'air weapon') would use poison gas to bomb British cities (chemical weapons were first used in the First World War). People were told to take them everywhere and children spent many hours in school practicing putting them on in a hurry.

Actually, the Luftwaffe never did use chemical weapons against Britain. The growing sophistication in bomb technology, culminating in the frightening V1 and V2 rockets (the doodlebugs - launched against London a week after the D-Day landings in June 1944) meant there was no need to use a weapon that had proved relatively ineffective in the First World War.

We had three shelters in our house

In September 1940, following failure in the Battle of Britain (Hitler's attempt to knock out Britain's airbases and destroy the RAF), Germany launched the 'Blitz'. Between 7th September and 2nd November 1940, London was bombed every night. The government had previously given away 2.5 million Anderson shelters. These were only free to poor people; men who earned more than £5 per week could buy an Anderson shelter for £7. They were named after John Anderson, the minister whom Neville Chamberlain had put in charge of Air Raid Precautions (ARP), and they were erected in people's gardens. They could protect up to six people from anything except a direct hit.

In March 1941 the government began issuing Morrison Shelters. Named after Home Secretary Herbert Morrison, these indoor shelters were made of heavy steel and could also be used as a table. Two or three people could sleep under them. One in six homes throughout Britain was affected by German bombing.

3 Action and apprehension

All of a sudden we were in the garden and three [enemy] planes came from the coast towards us...then there was the most enormous whining from a very much higher, very high speed engine and we looked out of the window and saw a Spitfire coming towards them

The Battle of Britain began on 8th August 1940. Britain already had RADAR stations as part of the coastal defences in place. These proved highly effective in providing early warning of Luftwaffe attacks and significantly contributed to Britain's ultimate victory in the Battle of Britain. The RAF lost around 915 aircraft and the Germans around 1733 in the Battle of Britain.

We had a full bomb load, ten tonnes of high explosive bombs, and we had to fly a couple of thousand miles to drop these bombs on a target

Allied bombing raids on Germany were as fierce as the Blitz, and equally ineffective in achieving their aims. Cologne and Berlin were flattened, and Dresden burned in a firestorm.

5 Food rationing

We used to have to go with these coupons to the shops and stand in queues and I used to say to my mother, if you see a queue join it, because there's something there

In November 1939 people had to choose the shops from which they wanted to buy food. They then had to register with these shops. In January 1940 ration books were issued to everyone. They were only allowed to buy rationed goods at the shops they had chosen. Sausages, bread, potatoes and other vegetables were not rationed but could be hard to come by. Children were given half the adult ration and were given their own ration book. Clothes were also rationed as it then freed the 450,000 people involved in the textile industry for war effort. Even Churchill did his bit, often appearing in public wearing a boiler suit known as a 'siren

suit' – a very practical garment with a zip up the front, ideal to put over pyjamas when you had to go to the air raid shelter at 3.00 in the morning.

...and then my father said 'we're going to dig the lawn up'

Everyone was encouraged to become more self sufficient in producing food and the phrase 'Dig for Victory' became one of the most famous slogans. Civilians dug up back yards and gardens to grow vegetables and those who had enough space kept chickens or even pigs.

...that banana was so precious

As an island, imports by ship were vital. Apart from the fact that merchant ships were a prime target for German torpedoes, the government wanted to keep as many ships as possible for military transport.

Life was so difficult, I can't tell you how difficult

The Russian people suffered unbearable hardship during the war. Nearly half of all people killed in the Second World War were killed in the Soviet Union (generally estimated at around 30 million, although official figures have never been released). Only about a third of these losses were combat-related.

In June 1941, the German army invaded the USSR, breaking the 1939 Nazi/Soviet non-aggression pact. Three million troops with 3000 tanks crossed the Soviet border. Stalin had ordered the Russian people to burn anything that would be useful to the advancing Germans, including crops and animals. The advance towards Moscow was seemingly unstoppable. The German military tactic, Blitz Krieg (literally translates as lightning war), was a rapid, co-ordinated attack involving tanks, troops, artillery and aircraft and had been highly successful. In the event a combination of a desperate civilian defence, a reorganised Red Army and the Russian winter halted the German army and eventually lead to their retreat back to Berlin.

By 1944 the Russian Army had won many victories, defeating the Germans in Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Yugoslavia. On April 24th 1945, they were the first of the Allied armies (Britain, America, Canada, and USSR) to reach Berlin.

We were sent away to do potato picking because all the young men were away at war... the potato pickers on the other side of the field were German prisoners of war

Women had to do the jobs left vacant by male workers. Although Britain never allowed women an active combat role, it was the first country to conscript women to do war work; at the end of 1941 all unmarried women between 19 and 30 were called up; they could choose between the women's service, civil defence or industry. Many of the German and Italian POWs were set to work on farms during the war.

6 Danger in action

Our ships were being sunk in the Atlantic so very badly and of course you couldn't get the supplies in so there were a lot of very brave chaps on those ships.

The Merchant Navy faced the same dangers of war as the armed forces, constantly threatened by German U-boats. The 'Battle of the Atlantic' began with the sinking of the passenger liner Athenia on 3rd September 1939 and didn't end until the German surrender in 1945. The Atlantic convoys, a response to the German U-boat campaign, were only partly successful in protecting the ships from torpedoes. Many thousands of British merchant seamen died in the struggle to bring food, fuel and war equipment to Britain.

One raid over Nuremberg, where Adolf Hitler used to have all these big speeches and things...

The Nuremberg Rally of 1934 was a brilliant propaganda event, carefully stage-managed by the Nazis. It was here, more than anywhere, that Hitler mesmerised the German people with the power of his oratory. His theme, of Germany becoming a great power once more, appealed to many who still harboured bitter feelings from the First World War and the penal reparations on Germany that had resulted. The rally was on a massive scale, with huge Nazi swastikas, burning torches and military uniforms adding to the general excitement. Hitler commissioned the famous film maker, Leni Riefenstahl, to make a documentary film 'Triumph of Will'. Hitler has the crowd in a state of ecstasy and the film makes him appear the German Messiah. (Führer means leader and Reich, as in Third Reich, means 'rule' - there was no Second Reich).

Fortunately we didn't have one of those awful telegrams from the war office like so many people did

These telegrams were notoriously impersonal. It wasn't until the 1965 that the 'War Office' changed its name to the 'Ministry of Defence'.

7 Churchill

We were fantastically inspired by Churchill; I don't think we could have coped without him. He was just the right man for the job at that particular time

Churchill took over from Neville Chamberlain on May 10th 1940 after a public clamour. The war had not gone well and many blamed Chamberlain for Britain's failure to save Norway from the Germans. Churchill, a Conservative, formed a coalition government and Clement Attlee, the Labour Party leader and future Prime Minister, became Deputy Prime Minister. Chamberlain died of cancer on the 9th November 1940.

...when he said we will fight them on the street, we will fight them on the beaches and so on and so forth...

Churchill set the tone for his leadership in his first report to the House of Commons: 'I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat'. It was the first of his wartime speeches, which seemed to hold the country together and inspired people around the world. This particular speech was broadcast to the nation from the House of Commons on June 4th 1940.

For all his inspiring speeches, Churchill did not make it to the end of the war as Prime Minister. On 5th July 1945 people voted in the first General Election for nine years. Clement Attlee, the Labour leader, was voted into power and became Britain's third wartime Prime Minister.

8 Bombing from above and below

...and I remember saying, I can hear myself saying it, what have we done? Oh those poor people, all the women and children and old people blown to pieces, burned alive; we did that. A terrible feeling of shame overcame me

About 130,000 people were killed in Dresden in 1945. It has long been argued by commentators, German and British alike, that the bombing of Dresden was wrong. Coming at this particular time in the war with Germany on the verge of collapse, it was an industrial though non-strategic target. Some, even at the time, accused the Chief of RAF Bomber Command, Air Chief Marshall (Bomber) Harris, of clinging to the extremely controversial theory that terror bombing alone could break the enemy's will to fight.

9 Coping with loss

Before the war my father was a priest and he didn't agree with several things of the Nazi regime; he had to become a soldier and fight for Germany in Russia

Hitler hated the Catholic religion and even made plans to kill the Pope. His own attitude towards Christianity has long been debated by historians, although he replaced the Bible in Germany's schools with 'Mein Kampf' (My Struggle). He authorized the killing of thousands of priests and nuns. Sending this priest to the Eastern front was a virtual death sentence. The eastern Front was one of the most bitter of all the theatres of war. Millions of German soldiers, many from non-German parts of the Nazi empire, perished in the freezing Russian winters or at the hands of the Soviet army. Fewer than 750,000 German soldiers returned from the Eastern front.

Your leaders didn't talk about losses

Fifty-seven nations went to war. Nearly sixty million servicemen and civilians died. As a percentage of the total population, Britain, who had been in the war longer than any other nation, also lost more people than any other nation. Britain lost 264,000 soldiers and 60,000 civilians due to bombing raids.

10 Conscience and consequences

...and we should be trying to help each other and not destroy. Will it ever change?

Since the end of the Second World War there has only been one year, 1967, when a British serviceman has not been killed on active service somewhere in the world. The list includes: Malaya, Palestine, Korea, Kenya, Egypt (Suez), Kuwait, Brunei, Aden, Northern Ireland, Falklands, The Gulf, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq.