

WAR LETTERS

Monday

May 30, 2011

at 9/8c

program 1401

60 minutes

*Chorwon Valley, Korea
November/December 1952*

I'm coming home! It's official as of this morning. It will be sometime before I crash in your door, a few weeks maybe, but I'm coming home. That little house is going to look like a palace to me. And, you people like Kings, and Queens. I have spent 12 months over here, the longest 30 years of my life. You know, it's almost funny. We see a guy on crutches, we break our backs trying to help him. But what about the wounds you can't see? The phantoms, the nightmares, the ghosts in your head? You'll need lots of patience with me. Patience, and understanding. See you soon. See you soon. See you soon. — Junior

On Monday, May 30, 2011, at 9:00 pm EST AMERICAN EXPERIENCE presents *War Letters*, a collection of newly discovered personal correspondence that brings to life the deepest, most human side of war, from the American Revolution to the Gulf War. Based on Andrew Carroll's recent *New York Times* bestseller, *War Letters: Extraordinary Correspondence from American Wars*, the film transcends the subject of war by exploring the love, passion, pain, horror, and hope of the men and women who fought and those who waited at home. The producer is Robert Kenner (*John Brown's Holy War; Influenza 1918*).

With no narrator, no star subjects, and a timeline that spans three centuries, *War Letters* is less a traditional documentary than a tone poem, written in the collective voice of ordinary men and women: soldiers, sweethearts, sons, brothers, fathers, wives, cousins and friends. Read by a cast of celebrity actors (Edward Norton, Esai Morales, Joan Allen, and David Hyde Pierce among them), the letters are illustrated with dramatic archival footage and photographs, evocative recreations, and images of those who wrote and received letters from American battlefronts.

Many accounts of battle are stunningly brutal. "Suddenly I heard the ball go crash! and I knew by the sound that it had burst a human skull. . . and then I saw Sgt. Chauncy Goldsmith quivering and dying," writes one Civil War soldier. "It was forty days of unrelenting hell. In fact, the comparison is hardly fair to hell," says a letter from World War I.

Nurse June Wandrey wrote: "Dearest Family, A few days ago, I was giving medications before lights out. As I finished with this one very young soldier and was tucking his blankets around him, he said, 'My mother always kissed me goodnight when she tucked me in bed.' So I kissed him on the forehead. He blushed, covered his head with the blanket, and everyone else called, 'Mommy, Mommy.'"

Some of the letters explore soldiers' transformation after experiencing combat: "Dear Reverend: Here I sit, thinking of the little church back home, wondering how you

are getting along. Don't think I am down-hearted but ever since I volunteered I've felt like a cog in a huge wheel. The cog may get smashed up, but the machine goes on... And I can't feel God is in it. How can there be fairness in one man being maimed for life, suffering agonies, another killed instantaneously, while I get out of it safe? Does God really love us individually or does He love His purpose more?"

Another soldier responds to wounds inflicted not by battle but by a "Dear John" letter from home: "There are 500,000 N. Koreans and Chinese on the other side of that hill bound and determined to make sure I don't have a future. Over here where your past is your last breath, your present is this breath, and your future is your next breath, you don't make too many promises." He was killed two days later.

From the battlefield and the home front, letters of love and longing share the deep anguish of families torn apart by war. "I think it is high time you are coming home because Jan is beginning to call every man she sees in a magazine 'Daddy.'" "No letter again today. I hope I get one this afternoon. The poor postman, he hates to come without a letter." "Mother dear, I will come marching home one of these days and we will all be together and happy again, won't we?"

Charting America's outlook on war through the centuries, letters express the politics and opinions of their authors. "What is most horrid of all in this contest is that brother will meet brother and father will meet son in the strife," writes a Civil War soldier. "I know now, for certain, what we are fighting for! . . . Give the children of this and the coming generations a chance to learn the true meaning of Freedom," writes a proud Japanese American soldier after liberating European towns at the end of World War II. From Vietnam comes anger: "The truth will not be told to the U.S. They kill a lot of men and tell you only half of the number."

Several extraordinary letters go beyond battles and bloodshed to probe greater injustices and atrocities. In a letter to Yank magazine, a black officer tells of being refused service at a southern U.S. railroad station lunchroom while German POWs ate inside. "Are we not American soldiers, sworn to fight for and die if need be for this our country? Then why are they treated better than we are?" Another soldier writes from Hitler's luxurious Munich apartment about the "living hell" of Dachau.

"Forgive me for taking your life, I was reacting just the way I was trained. . . . As of today we are no longer enemies," writes veteran Richard Luttrell to the man he killed on a trail in Vietnam. Luttrell placed the letter, along with a photo of his victim and his daughter, at the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C.

The book *War Letters* sprang from Andrew Carroll's Legacy Project, the archivist's attempt to gather war letters from attics and dresser drawers across America for preservation. A mention in the syndicated "Dear Abby" column unleashed a flood of more than 50,000 letters into Carroll's post office box in Washington, D.C. Carroll, who is 31, recognized that younger generations may not understand the sacrifices made by war veterans. "It's important to remember the graphic nature of war, and I think nothing strips away the glamour and the romance more than these letters," he says.

As war becomes a distant memory to most Americans, these letters breathe passionate human life into the events that have indelibly imprinted the soul of a nation.

Credits

War Letters

Writers: Paul Taylor, Robert Kenner
Producer/Director: Robert Kenner
Editor: Leonard Feinstein
Co-Producer: Melissa Adelson
Cinematographer: Neil Reichline
Composer: Mark Adler

Letters read by

Joan Allen	David Hyde Pierce
Jordan Bridges	Bill Paxton
Chris Gehrman	Giovanni Ribisi
Michael Hagiwara	Kyra Sedgwick
Esai Morales	Eric Stoltz
Gerald McRaney	Lawrence Turner
Edward Norton	Courtney B. Vance

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

April 2011

American Experience is a production of WGBH Boston.
Executive producer: Mark Samels
Senior producer: Sharon Grimberg

Press Contacts

Cara White
843-881-1480
cara.white@mac.com

Accessibility

American Experience is closed captioned for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers by The Caption Center at WGBH.

Mary Lugo
770-623-8190
lugo@negia.net

A special narration track is added to the series by Descriptive Video Service[®] (DVS[®]), a service of WGBH to provide access to people who are blind or visually impaired. The DVS narration is available on the SAP channel of stereo TVs and VCRs.

About WGBH Boston

WGBH Boston is America's preeminent public broadcasting producer. One-third of PBS's prime-time lineup and companion Web content as well as many public radio favorites are produced by WGBH. The station also is a pioneer in educational multimedia and in access technologies for people with disabilities.

© 2001
WGBH Educational Foundation

For more information visit www.pbs.org/americanexperience