



THE WAR



A KEN BURNS FILM

DIRECTED AND PRODUCED BY KEN BURNS AND LYNN NOVICK

Letters From The Front Lines

Subjects:

American History, English

Background:

Soldiers and military personnel on the battlefronts of World War II stayed connected to their loved ones through letter writing. Because the U.S. military was concerned that intercepted letters would provide the enemy with detailed information about the location of troops and battle plans, all mail sent home was censored before it was mailed as V Mail, or Victory Mail. In this letter-writing activity, students examine the writing of one witness to war before writing their own letters.

Activity:

Watch the beginning of the “Letters from the Front Lines” clip featuring the letters of Corrado “Babe” Ciarlo from Waterbury, Conn. Babe was a corporal in the 3rd Infantry Division, 15th Regiment, Company G, in Mark Clark’s 5th Army. Babe was with the American forces that invaded the Anzio beaches of Italy and were subsequently pinned down in a defenseless position by enemy fire.

GO TO CLIP

http://www.pbs.org/thewar/search_details.php?id=5376&type=3

You may also wish to read Babe’s letters to the class.

March 27, 1944. I just got through with chow. We are having beautiful weather here and I hope it’s the same way there, so you could take the babies out every afternoon.

*Love,
Babe*

April 14, 1944. I am in the very best of health and I hope to hear the same from all of you always. Well, things here are moving pretty smooth and the only thing I do is eat and sleep and if I keep it up much longer I’ll be like a barrel. Well, take care of yourselves and keep those stoves roaring because I’ll be doing a lot of eating when I get home.

*Love,
Babe*

April 30, 1944. This afternoon I might go swimming in the Tyrrhenian Sea. The salt water will do me good. Last night I received about ten letters. I’m glad to hear that the house was filled with flowers for Mother’s Day and that you all got a gift for Mom. Don’t worry about my money situation, because there isn’t anything to spend it on here in Anzio. Well, I had my dinner and guess what, I had – pork chops, about a dozen of them. I’m getting to be a chow hound.

*Love,
Babe*

As a class, discuss:

- To whom is Babe writing, one person or many?
- What does Babe recount that his family will be happy to hear?
- In what ways does Babe make it sound as if he is practically on a vacation?
- What do you think he might be implying when he says, “Don’t worry about my money situation, because there isn’t anything to spend it on here in Anzio”?
- In what ways does Babe intimately convey that he is still very connected to his home and family?
- Why do you think Babe does not give his family more details about the real conditions on the beaches of Anzio?

Watch the second segment of the “Letters from the Front Lines” clip to disclose the comments of Babe’s brother, Thomas.

“He never mentioned a word about what he was doing, where he was. You couldn’t say much about where you were anyway. But it was always the upside. ‘I could only write a few lines right now because I’m, I’m going to chow and I don’t have time.’ This is in the heat of the battle and he’s going to chow line. I mean, there’s no such thing as a chow line when you’re in... But you don’t realize at the time, until years later, you get a little smarter and you go, ‘Geez, you know, how can you be going to chow line when you’re in the middle of a battle or you’re in a foxhole or someplace?... But he always had that upbeat outlook about him.”

Ask students:

- How does Babe's brother interpret the letters he received from Babe differently today than he did during the war?
- Do you think Babe was right to hide so much of the reality he was living from his family?

Activity:

Ask students to imagine they are soldiers during World War II fighting on the front lines of a specific battle. Then assign them to write a letter home to family. They will need to do some research to be able to put themselves in a real geographical location and battlefield situation. Instruct the letter writers to strike a balance between being unrealistically upbeat and disclosing feelings and experiences that might be too upsetting for the recipient to handle. Students may also choose to write from the point of view of those holding a variety of military occupations such as nurse, chaplain, correspondent, supply staff, etc.

Visit the "SEARCH AND EXPLORE"

(http://www.pbs.org/thewar/search_home.htm) section of THE WAR web site for more information about letters written from the front lines.

Resources

Adler, Bill. *World War II Letters: A Glimpse into the Heart of the Second World War Through the Eyes of Those Who Were Fighting It*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003.

Battle Lines: Letters From America's Wars. Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.
(http://www.gilderlehrman.org/collection/battlelines/index_good.html)

Litoff, Judy Barnet and David C. Smith. *Since You Went Away: World War II Letters from American Women on the Home Front*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Schur, Joan Brodsky. *American Letters: 1930-1945*. Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin: Interact, 1986.

Stowe, Steven. *Making Sense of Letters and Diaries*. History Matters at George Mason University.
(<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/letters>)

Standards

National Standards for History, National Center for History in the School at (<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/nchs>)

Era 8 Standard 3C The student understands the effects of World War II at home. Explain how the United States mobilized its economic and military resources during World War II. Analyze the effects of World War II on gender roles and the American family.

National Council for the Social Studies, Curriculum Standards for Social Studies.

Standard II d. Systematically employ processes of critical historical inquiry to reconstruct and reinterpret the past, such as using a variety of sources and checking their credibility, validating and weighing evidence for claims, and searching for causality.

Language Arts, Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McRel) at (<http://www.mcrel.org>)

Standard 1: The Writing Process

- Uses prewriting strategies
- Drafts and revises; redrafts for readability, style, content and linguistic structures.
- Edits own and others' writing
- Uses strategies to address different audiences
- Writes fictional, biographical, autobiographical and observational narrative compositions...
- Writes descriptive compositions; reflects on personal experience.
- Writes in response to literature; analyzes and interprets

Standard 2: Uses Stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing

- Uses precise and descriptive language
- Develops effective paragraphs in logical sequence; uses supporting detail
- Varies sentences structures
- Uses a variety of transitional devices
- Develops personal styles and voice

Joan Brodsky Schur is the Social Studies Coordinator at the Village Community School where she has taught English and American history for over twenty-five years. She has worked for the National Archives and PBS Online developing lessons for their websites and served on the TeacherSource Advisory Group for PBS Online. Her most recent publication is Eyewitness to the Past: Strategies for Teaching American History in Grades 5-12.