



Season 6, Episode 10: Blueprint Special

Elyse: Our first story investigates the connection between an oversized record, and an ambitious military program to boost morale during the Second World War. When WWII breaks out across the Atlantic, President Roosevelt readies an army. With a boost from the first peacetime draft in U.S. history, troop numbers jump from 174,000 in 1939 to three quarters of a million in 1941. Soon the U.S. is at war, and American GI's are in combat all across the globe. The military is faced with the problem of keeping up the morale of troops spread out in theatres of war around the world. But there are some places the U.S. can't go. An easily distributed means for soldiers to entertain themselves is needed. An ingenious musical solution is proposed... more than half a century later, Gordon Greb of Chico, California, wonders if the old disk he's saved for many years may have been connected to the American war effort.

Gordon: When I was a soldier I found this old recording and it said it was a blueprint show and I've always wanted to know more about it.

Elyse: Hi.

Gordon: Hi Elyse. Come on in. Good to see you.

Elyse: Thank you...so Gordon, what do you have for me?

Gordon: Well I have this 16-inch disk here that I brought back from Fort Dix New Jersey at the end of World War II in 1945.

Elyse: Where did you find it?

Gordon: Well, I was working as a recording engineer for WDIX, the base radio station, and I was going to do another show, so I was looking into the library to find a blank disk, and pulled this out.

Elyse: Instead of a blank disc, Gordon heard two unfamiliar songs and what sounded like an announcement for a musical theatre show called "*Hi Yank*" to be performed at Fort Dix in August 1944. The recording left him puzzled.

Gordon: There is a narrator on one of the cuts that says it's a blueprint show presumably to be taken overseas to entertain GI's at the front. By the time I found this record and wanted to know about it all the GI's that had made it, had shipped out, they were gone and the questions I asked about it nobody knew.



Elyse: Gordon wants to learn more about the theatre production advertised on his record, and why it's called a blueprint musical. And he has another question.

Gordon: Did the army ever send this show overseas to entertain our troops on the fighting front?

Elyse: Can I listen to it now?

Gordon: Not on home equipment, it's a big 16-inch deck and you have to get professional equipment.

Elyse: 60 years ago, Gordon's radio station had that equipment, but now it's long obsolete. So I'm taking the record to the national audio-visual conservation centre at the Library of Congress. The sleeve says "*glass*"... and there's more information on the label. There's something handwritten and it looks like it says 05/18/44. That date is less than one month before the Allied D-Day invasion of Europe during World War II...certainly an interesting time to be focused on a musical theatre show. Well, it does say Fort Dix New Jersey and handwritten on there it says the program is *High Yank*, Fitzgivens interview which is two minutes long, "*guard mount*" and "*the biggest job*." Those must be the songs Gordon heard, but I'm not sure how to play this disc without potentially damaging it. So I'm meeting Gene Deanna, head of the Recorded Sound section here at the library, which is home to more than two-million historic recordings. Okay. So here's the record.

Gene: Well, the record is a 16-inch transcription disc. Coated in lacquer. Transcription discs were used by radio stations in the years before tape was invented. It started really being used about 1935. During the war '40 to '45, they usually used glass because of an aluminum shortage.

Elyse: But, despite saying "glass" on the disc's sleeve, Gene says that's not the case here. Uh, huh.

Gene: This is a war time era disc that's actually on aluminium. That's a little bit unusual.

Elyse: That's unusual. He explains that aluminium was a key wartime metal used for making airplanes, and was in short supply.

Gene: This just tells me that there's something special about it.

Elyse: I want to listen to it; is there anyone here that can help me do that?

Gene: We have an audio engineer who can play it back. Follow me.



Elyse: First, the 60-year-old disc gets a much-needed cleaning by recording engineer Brad McCoy.

Gene: This arm has a vacuum and it sucks the fluid off as well as any materials that may be down in the grooves.

Elyse: Then Brad makes a digital copy to take with me. And I get set up in the studio where I can finally hear what Gordon first heard more than half a century ago.

Record: (*Scratching sound*)

Elyse: It's the song called "*The Biggest Job*."

Record: (*song*) *This is the biggest, the toughest
The ruggedest and the roughest.
The most important job I ever had.*

Elyse: The *Biggest Job* sends an important message, it talks about how hard the soldiers have to work and how the fate of our nation is in their hands. Gordon's record is promoting the show with previews of certain musical numbers.

Record: (*Voiceover*) *This show "Hi Yank" is a real soldier's show, it's taken right from the pages of Yank, the army weekly, which I am told is read by at least 7 and a half million soldiers from Burma to Normandy.*

Elyse: *Yank* magazine, it's definitely something I should look into.

Record: (*Voiceover*) *It is a blueprint show. Blueprint because after its premiere at Fort Dix then it will be compiled into the blueprint and with complete instructions sent to troops overseas for final production.*

Elyse: It sounds like the blueprint being advertised is a set of instructions for soldiers on how to stage a musical themselves. But it's not clear how these instructions were delivered, or whether this musical was ever performed overseas. According to the label, the record likely originated from an office called Special Services. Why would the Army go through all this effort and expense just for soldiers to do theatre? I think the best place for me to start is to learn more about the Special Services. Veteran Dr. Jack Pulwers has written on entertainment in the military, and is aware of "*Hi Yank*", though he has never heard it.

Jack: It was done by the theatrical productions of the Special Services and produced under the aegis of General Frederick Osborn, who was the chief of Special Services at that time.



Elyse: During World War I, attempts to boost morale involved tending to the general welfare and recreational needs of soldiers. But General Osborn was ordered to take a different tack and use musical theatre to combat a spreading threat to America's defences that had begun at home even before the U.S. went to war. Even though the army tripled in size when Europe first erupted in conflict, the U.S. still hoped to remain neutral. Jack explains that the seemingly endless watching and waiting took a heavy toll on the enlisted men.

Jack: They were really in bad shape before Pearl Harbor soldiers were stagnating in places like Alaska or down in Panama getting bit by mosquitoes and having nothing to do and sweltering in that hot heat. The suicide rate had escalated to new heights. President Roosevelt decided that the troops had had enough.

Elyse: An entire division was created within the U.S. Army devoted to entertaining troops and maintaining morale. But as troops were sent into combat overseas, professional entertainment couldn't always reach them.

Jack: So when you ask where the entertainment was at World War II, the entertainment didn't come from the Bob Hopes as much as it did from the soldiers themselves to produce shows like this.

Elyse: Jack recognizes a soft propaganda message in both songs.

Record – (Song) “Guard Mount”

Jack: (quoting) Well, darn it, I'm going to make the best of it even though I'm in the mud, I'm fighting in the mud, I guess I'll stay there until this thing is done.

Elyse: To help get the message out, the army chose for its main character a familiar figure from the popular weekly magazine, “Yank”.

Jack: *Sad Sack* was the actual picture of the lonely neglected GI pushed around by his sergeant, kicked around in the fox holes the soldier understood that *Sad Sack* was him that he was just the common everyday soldier who wanted to fight for principles and for his country and there was something then to fight for.

Elyse: Productions of “*Hi Yank*” circulated around military bases in the United States. records like Gordon's were played on army radio stations – like WDIX at Fort Dix where Gordon worked to let GI's know what was coming up on the entertainment schedule. But Jack has never seen the blueprint for “*Hi Yank*” described on the record, and he doesn't know if it was ever performed by the fighting troops overseas, either. So I'm headed to Fort Belvoir in Virginia to speak with Nick Credgington, who oversees the army's theatre program of more than 250 annual productions. Have you ever seen a record like this before Nick?



Nick: No I haven't, and it was a very great surprise to find that you had come up with one, because recording this sort of stuff during World War II was not easy and was not common.

Elyse: So this is a rare piece?

Nick: It's a rare piece. Very rare.

Elyse: Nick says he's found an equally rare document for me – the actual blueprint, or instruction manual, for the show that Gordon's record was promoting.

Nick: These blueprint specials were the most detailed book on how to do a show ever written.

Elyse: This 185-page booklet has everything a soldier would need to stage a performance –, from a script to sheet music and instructions on lighting and set design – using what the troops had in their footlockers, mess kits, or even the trash. Conchita!

Nick: Yes, all how to put it together. Small t-shirt dyed yellow, sew shredded yellow paper on sleeve as indicated in sketch. All very, very detailed. All designed to be done with what could be found.

Elyse: The script includes all the details of the show only hinted at on Gordon's promotional recording...scenes depicting the misadventures of the bumbling soldier named "*Sad Sack*" are full of inside jokes about army life. This isn't the detail I put you on, how come you're not out policing the area?

Nick: (reading part of *Sad Sack*) *I got too frightened, I saw a big snake on the ground, and when I tried to smack it, it turned out to be a piece of wood.*

Elyse: What is so frightening about that?

Nick: Nothing, but the thing I picked up to hit it with turned out to be a snake.

Elyse: That's cute. Alright, now I get it. We could do it, anybody could do it. Right?

Nick: That's right. Very simple, funny, skits after skits.

Elyse: The show also has serious scenes about nostalgia for home, and the importance of serving one's country. Is there any information about who wrote it, who put it together?



Nick: Most of these publications were not really credited to any individuals because they were army publications. In this particular case it's sort of unique, in that we do know.

Elyse: The manual includes a sample program, and production credits listing several writers -- among them private Frank Loesser and Lieutenant Alex North.

Nick: Frank Loesser wrote such shows as "*Damn Yankees*" and "*Guys and Dolls*". Alex North was responsible for the music for "*Bridge on the River Kwai*" and "*Spartacus*."

Elyse: Nick explains that the army sought out talent among the enlisted ranks and put them to work with special services.

Nick: These people were performing better for the army doing this than shooting bullets on the front lines.

Elyse: It was a formula that worked – in the back of the blueprint there are rave reviews from major publications. A lusty, fast moving performance says the *New York Times*.

Nick: A rousing hit says *Variety*.

Elyse: Any indication that this play "*Hi Yank*" went overseas?

Nick: The book certainly went overseas because this was one of the issues that ended up in Germany.

Elyse: But did the troops overseas ever manage to stage a production of "*Hi Yank*"? Nick's not sure. Hi Frank.

Frank: Hello Elyse.

Elyse: How are you?

Frank: Fine. Yourself?

Elyse: Archivist Frank Shirer at the U.S. Army Centre of Military History is scouring their archives for any mention of "*Hi Yank*."

Frank: Spanish American War.... special... here we go, Special Services Division.



Elyse: It seems like there's a lot? There are thousands of documents related to the Special Services Division. But we don't turn up any mention of "*Hi Yank*", so Franks suggests a 13-volume history of special services that was published after the war.

Frank: I think we will have a better chance there since that is indexed.

Elyse: This extraordinary document lists every type of entertainment being performed all over the world by special services.

Elyse: This is mainly about movies. Ok, nothing here. After some more digging, we finally discover a memo tagged "*Hi Yank*."

Frank: Here we go!

Elyse: I see it.

Frank: Report on recommendations by the civilian advisory committee. 8th September, 1944.

Elyse: It looks like I can finally close the curtain on this investigation. Well first of all, let me just thank you because this was a lot of fun. A blueprint is a book; it's instructions on how to put together a theatrical performance from A to Z.

Gordon: Fantastic, I mean I'm so pleased that you found that out.

Elyse: I explain how the army enlisted a-list entertainment professionals to write shows like "*Hi Yank*" for soldiers. And I think you'll find interesting that one of the people was Frank Loesser.

Gordon: "*Guys and Dolls*."

Elyse: Very good. The last thing that you asked me was, um, was this performed overseas? And that was a tough one. It wasn't until I visited the Centre for Military History that I found some really special documents.

Flashback:

Frank: Touring units. Take a look at this.

Elyse: "A touring company has been formed in Italy to tour a production of "*Hi, Yank!*" That's it!



Frank: This is proof that "*Hi Yank*" was being performed in Italy in 1944, by soldiers, for soldiers, and thus the recording was a practice for this performance.

Elyse: In June of 1944 – as Allied Forces landed on the beaches of Normandy, and in Italy, advanced north of Rome – the do-it-yourself fun gave weary GI's a much needed-boost to their morale.

Gordon: That's great. I'm really pleased that it had that kind of a benefit for the war effort. I'm glad now I saved it all these years.

Elyse: I give Gordon the digital copy the library of congress made of the record he's held onto since 1945.

Elyse: You should know that owning an original copy of a recording from World War II is extremely rare. It's quite a find. What are you going to do with it?

Gordon: I'm going to donate it to the Library of Congress so that everybody can hear it and share in the pleasures of the music that represents World War II.