

Ken Burns - images and sounds of

The War

"To see a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower, hold infinity in the palm of your hand and eternity in an hour."

"Auguries of Innocence"
by William Blake

Ken Burns quoted that line from the 200-year-old poem while describing his intentions for *The War*. His new epic documentary focuses on the Second World War from the perspectives of ordinary Americans who fought the battles on the beaches and in the trenches. The 14-hour, seven-part film includes a collage of memories of some 50 survivors and riveting archival footage taken by combat cameramen in the heat of battle.

The War was produced and directed by Burns and Lynn Novick for Florentine Films and WETA-TV in Washington, D.C. It will premiere on PBS stations in the United States in September.

Burns dreamed up the concept during the mid-1990s. He envisioned an anecdotal documentary told from the perspectives of witnesses rather than historians, politicians and generals talking about strategies, tactics, armaments and the moral need to defeat the Axis powers. Burns put the idea on the shelf because he had his fill of death and mayhem during production of the 1990 documentary *The Civil War*. He changed his mind after hearing that some 1,000 United States veterans of World War II were dying every day.

"Most documentaries are expressions of fixed ideas," Burns says.

"*The War* was a process of discovery. We embraced what we discovered and got to know the people whose stories are featured in *The War* like members of our family."

Burns explains that the stories of survivors highlighted the need to give the audience a sense of what it was like to be on the beaches at Iwo Jima, Tarawa, Palau, Saipan and Normandy, and to parachute into Holland as part of Operation Market Garden.

"We spent years at the National Archives finding incredible footage taken by combat photographers who risked their lives to get the story on film," he says. "We also found film at other archives in the U.S., and in Tokyo, Moscow, Berlin and London. We also found compelling images on 8mm and some 16mm movies taken by hobbyists."

Burns and Novick chose four geographically distributed towns as sites for filming conversations with survivors. Mobile, Alabama, was the hometown of Eugene Sledge, author of the war memoir *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa*. It was a shipbuilding center in the old segregated South. Sacramento, California, had a large Japanese-American population and was home to munitions factories and military bases. Waterbury, Connecticut, had a significant number of people who worked in war factories. Luverne, Minnesota, was the hometown of Quentin C. Aanenson, whose exploits inspired the 1993 PBS documentary *A Fighter Pilot's Story*.

During the next five years, they researched newspaper archives, visited historical societies and veterans groups, and let the public in the four cities know that they were looking for people who had stories to tell.

They also found compelling words in memoirs and letters written by people who had died during the war or afterwards. Tom Hanks, Samuel L. Jackson, Eli Wallach and a few other personalities narrated the written words against the backgrounds of images recorded by combat cameramen.

"I worked as a freelance cameraman for several years after graduating from Hampshire College in 1975," Burns says. "I gave up shooting when I realized that I wanted to look into the eyes of the people I was interviewing. Buddy Squires has been my cameraman ever since *Brooklyn Bridge* in 1980. We have worked together on 19 films."

The look of film

Burns did some of the interviews and Novick did the majority. Squires was the principal cinematographer with the aid of an assistant and sound person. They produced *The War* in Super 16 film format and completed post-production in 16:9 HD format.

"I love the look of film and the feelings it evokes," Burns says. "It is how I choose to express myself, like a painter who chooses oils instead of watercolors. We were dealing with people's most painful memories. They had seen their best friends killed or maimed and had come close to that themselves. We wanted it to feel organic."

"The interviews were usually done in the survivors' homes to make them feel as comfortable as possible. We asked questions conversationally, and Buddy's lighting was sympathetic. He helped us make everyone feel comfortable and look good. Buddy

used soft light that he made subtly darker and brighter in tune with the words. Composition was also interpretive, depending on the environments."

Squires carried just enough gear to work in whatever environments he found. It included an Aaton PROD camera with Canon 8:64mm and 11:165mm zoom lenses, and a few small lights. Images were recorded on EASTMAN EXR 100T 7248 film during the first half of the project. They switched to KODAK VISION2 7212 when it was introduced.

"We were trying to make it as easy as possible for 70- and 80-year-old people to tell their stories," Squires says. "Ken and Lynn were extremely sensitive while encouraging people to relate their painful memories."

Squires also shot scenes on the beaches in Normandy and at other places where battles were fought. He explains that the archival film was frenetic, with bombs and shells exploding and landing craft hitting the beaches. The new footage is meant to give the audience glimpses of what those places are like in peaceful times.

"One of the great things about film is that it feels organic," Squires says. "That was especially important on this project. Film is also a proven archival medium. When you make a commitment like this, you want to know it will be there in the future."

Burns stresses that it was a team effort with words, sound effects and music in harmony with the images. Geoffrey C. Ward authored the script, which was narrated by Keith David. Wynton Marsalis composed, arranged and performed original music. Gene Scheer composed the music and wrote lyrics for "American Anthem," a theme song by Norah Jones. The rest of the



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soundtrack includes classical, jazz and swing.

The effects track echoed the realities of war. "In audio archives, we researched the sounds created by cannons, tanks riding on snow, gravel and pavement, and flights of airplanes," Burns says. "You can feel the bullets whizzing past your head and debris from grenade explosions falling on your shoulders when the images are augmented with 5.1 Dolby Surround Sound."

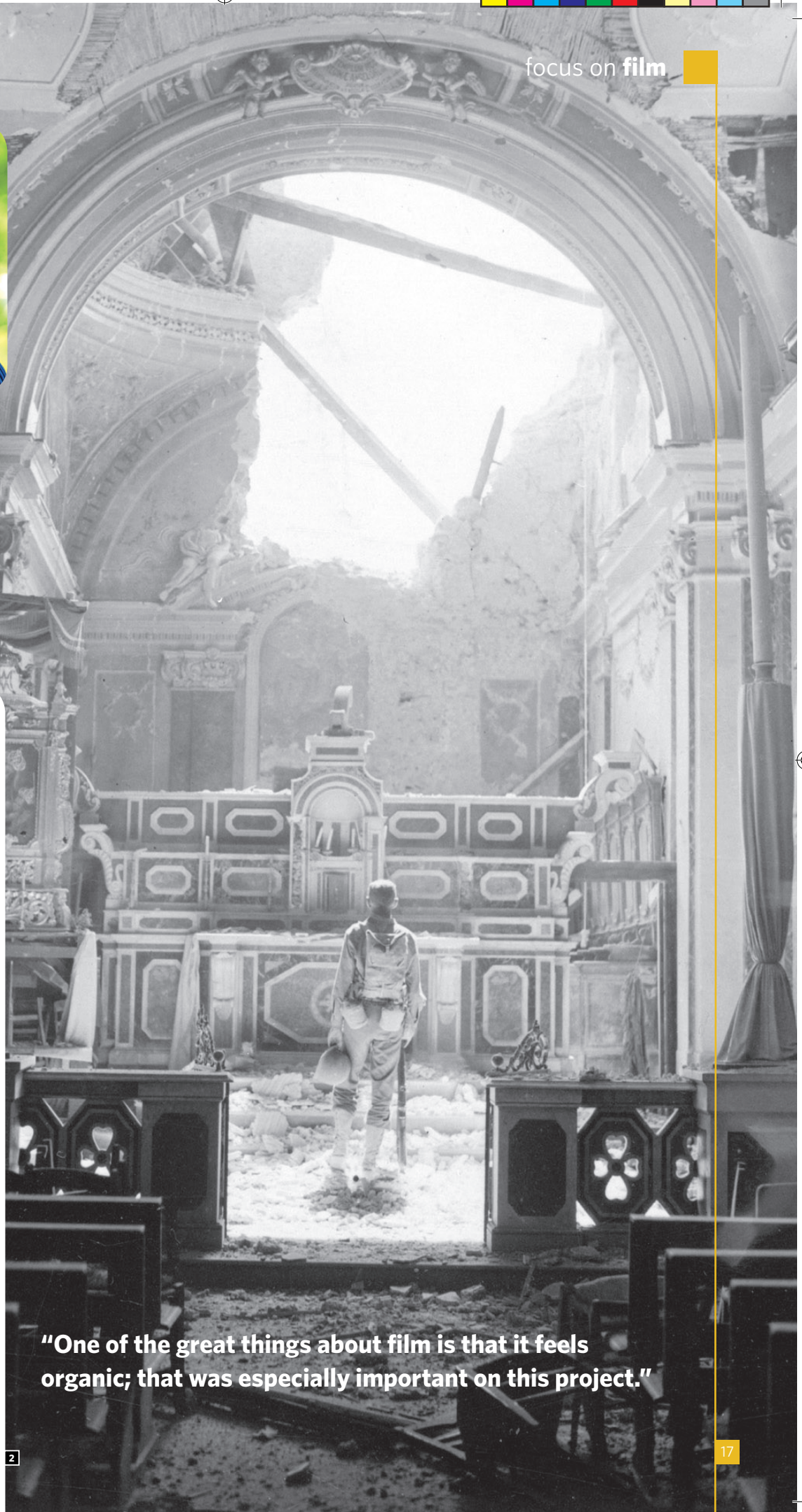
The negative was processed at DuArt, and post-production was done at Goldcrest Post in HD format by John Dowdell, a long-time collaborator with Burns. Both facilities are located in New York City.

"When we previewed *The War* for veterans, I watched tears running down their cheeks," Burns concludes. "Some of them told us that they have been waiting all of their lives for someone to tell the world what it was really like. I feel that's the best review I could possibly get."

1 Producer/director Ken Burns.

2 A damaged altar in Acerno, Italy in a scene from *The War*, produced and directed by Ken Burns.

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