

BBC RADIO COLLECTION

THE SECOND WORLD WAR



ORIGINAL RECORDINGS FROM THE BBC SOUND ARCHIVES

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

From Neville Chamberlain's historic declaration of war on Germany in 1939 to the sounds of rejoicing crowds on VJ Day in August 1945, the BBC brought the full picture of both the battle front and the home front, as well as the major speeches, to an attentive nation.

The strident sounds of battle, the stirring and inspiring words of Churchill, Montgomery and Roosevelt, reached every sitting room. News and information about the war – in all its ramifications – was brought home with the rawness and immediacy of these original reports.

This unique chronicle of war recordings, preserved for over 40 years, is both a testament to the BBC War Correspondents and a rare document in history.

War reporting took a huge leap forward in World War Two. Since the Crimean War, which had produced William Howard Russell's classic account of the charge of the Light Brigade, civilian correspondents had moved closely alongside our armed forces, reporting their exploits, often in heroic language, to newspaper and magazine readers back home.

Now, from 1939 to 1945, a world war of monumental significance was to be covered, in all its aspects, not only by traditional print journalists, but also by radio reporters. The actual sound of battle, in all its clamorous, strident pandemonium, was to reach every sitting room, together with the voices of the great battlefield commanders, the men in action and the observers at their side.

The techniques of the new medium were learnt, and forged, as the war progressed. They reach their peak in the campaign which was launched on the beaches of Normandy in June 1944, but from the very first day of the war the BBC's microphones were searching out all the significant moves and incidents across the gigantic and complex web of war activity.

This was an all-in war. The Home Front was a vital section of it, so the evacuation of the children, the blackout, the rationing, the Home Guard and the firefighters, the bombing and the blitz, were sound-recorded in all their graphic poignancy and horror, as an integral and major part of the full canvas. The BBC presented a total picture. This production tells it all.

Friendly nations were anxious to know how we were standing up to our fierce ordeal. Edward R. Murrow of CBS reported day by day from London in 1939 and 1940. His broadcasts had great influence in the USA, where he commanded a vast audience. There is little doubt that he helped to shape American opinion in those early, critical years. He takes his rightful place in this collection.

But the voice which rightly dominates the entire compilation is that of Winston Churchill, Britain's great war leader. When, even today, a listener finds his words stirring and inspiring, just reflect on what those broadcasts meant to an embattled nation, facing the greatest challenge of all its history. How fortunate it is that that voice, those accents and intonations, and those words, are here preserved.

For over forty years, these recordings of the war, at home and on all the battlefronts have been carefully preserved in the Sound Archives of the BBC. Nowhere else in the world does such a unique chronicle exist. Through their own special medium of sound, they tell the story of a towering climacteric in British history, and they relate it in terms which are the more eloquent because of their immediacy and their simplicity. Those of us who were war correspondents, working with the armies, thought only of the day. No consideration was ever given to the possibility that our reports might be heard again many decades later.

It was our duty to report, accurately and straight-forwardly, and with all possible speed, to the huge audience at home eagerly grasping at every fragment of war news. There was no time to polish our reports, to search for the telling phrase or the striking metaphor. Often we were broadcasting in hazardous circumstances, with half an eye all the time on the nearest available slit trench or bit of shelter. A great deal of our work was spontaneous and impromptu. Listeners were sometimes kind enough to say that the very rawness of our reports gave them authenticity. One hopes that a similar dispensation will be granted to us by those who hear the recordings now, forty or more years on.

Technically too the recordings are sometimes less than perfect. All BBC wartime recordings were on acetate disc. Tape recording had not yet arrived. In the African desert, in Eighth Army days, the 600-lb weight of recording equipment was mounted in a 30 cwt army truck. Think of the precautions now taken in recording studios, and record-making factories, to prevent any speck of dust from getting near the disc-cutters or the records themselves. Then consider our problems as we recorded in the desert, during severe sandstorms - a common experience.

From Normandy onwards, our mobile recording gear was based in sturdy Humber vehicles, very manoeuvrable, exactly like the Army's small ambulances. In addition, the BBC Engineering Department produced for us a small, portable recording device, mis-named 'the midget'. It was a wooden box, resembling an old-fashioned riverside portable gramophone, which opened up to expose a 10-inch turntable, with a spring-driven motor, together with a microphone and amplifier, and a stack of blank discs, each of which would run for two minutes.

'The midget' weighed 40-lbs, and was a cumbersome piece of equipment to carry around under fire. Moreover it had no playback, and it was worryingly unreliable. But, with all its imperfections, it was the

instrument which enabled the correspondent to get right out to the forward positions in the field, or to report with actuality sound from the bomber over Berlin or the airborne bridgehead at Arnhem. Many of the best and most striking items on these cassettes could not have been achieved without 'the midget'.

The disc, often recorded under grave difficulty, had to survive grievous hazards before it reached its ultimate destination. A record cut in the Western Desert - Godfrey Talbot in Libya for example - had somehow to be ferried hundreds of miles back to Cairo with perhaps some rough handling on the way. There it had to go through the hands of four separate censors - Army, Navy, RAF and Egyptian Government - who might or might not treat it kindly. Any passage that had to be cut was liable to be excised crudely, with damage to neighbouring grooves on each side of the deletion.

The disc then passed to a studio of Egyptian State Broadcasting for transmission to London by commercial beam radio. Reception in London might, or might not, be reasonably good. At the final reception point in Broadcasting House, the Cairo transmission was re-recorded, and at last the report was available for broadcasting. For our colleagues covering the war in the Far East, these problems of communication were greatly intensified. Even so, they got memorable recordings back to London, as these cassettes show.

BBC war correspondents had only one brief - to speak the truth. The extent to which the full truth could be stated was a matter for discussion every day with the censor. It meant determining how far a reporter could go without revealing information to the enemy which would put any of our forces at risk. Whereas there was always a delay before press material could get into enemy hands, radio was an instantaneous medium. We knew that the Germans monitored every word we said, and they would know the contents of our despatches as quickly as any listener in Britain. So we had to be exceptionally careful over any statements which might have immediate or early implication.

Of all the great commanders of World War Two, it was Montgomery who understood most clearly the potential of radio as an arm of warfare. He believed that morale was the greatest single factor in battle. If the soldier felt that he actually knew his commander, that would be a good start. So the Field Marshall went to great lengths to be seen by all his men. He wanted them also to hear him quite often, as part of the confidence-building process, and this is where the BBC came in. Such a message is Monty's El Alamein recording. Without any doubt, these broadcasts had a stimulating effect, right through the ranks.

Monty was concerned too, about home morale, and sympathised with the wives, parents and families anxious about their men in the field. More than once he pointed out to me, privately, that confidence at home would be reflected in letters sent out to the troops, and the mailbag, too, in his opinion, had a very real bearing on army morale.

It was largely due to Montgomery's vision of what broadcasting could contribute towards final victory that the BBC went into the final campaign in Europe equipped for its task of recording in sound as never before. When the British Expeditionary Forces landed in France in 1939, the BBC presence consisted only of Richard Dimbleby with one engineering colleague and a recording car. With Monty's support, for the campaign launched on the beaches of Normandy in June 1944, the BBC was able to field 27 reporters (including those with the Navy and the Air Force) together with a convoy of recording trucks and mobile transmitters manned by 33 engineers.

The BBC's reporting team suffered its casualties. Bernard Stubbs lost his life on a naval assignment when HMS Hood was sunk. Edward Ward was taken prisoner by the Germans in North Africa in 1942, but happily the album is able to include his own story of his release in 1945. Kent Stevenson was killed flying over Germany soon after D-Day, before he had been able to send back any major despatch, and Guy Byam lost his life a few months later in a bomber which failed to return from a Berlin raid.

Among the anonymous heroes of the BBC's war reporting team were the engineers, who worked as equals alongside the reporters, putting up with hard living and dangerous circumstances. They took their vehicles as far forward in battle as the military authorities would allow. Only ambulances went further. All the engineers performed miracles of maintenance, improvisation and innovation, producing results beyond all expectation.

A book could well be written about the stories behind the stories in this unique album. Charles Gardner's commentary in June 1940, for example, created great public controversy in Britain. It was hotly

argued that, war or no war, an eyewitness description in dramatic terms of a dogfight over Kent between RAF fighters and German bombers was not proper broadcasting material; it was treating an incident in which human life was at stake as if it were a sporting contest.

The historic Lüneberg surrender recordings were rushed to the nearby BBC mobile transmitter, to be broadcast live from there to the huge waiting audience in Britain. But in the middle of this crucial transmission, MCN, the transmitter which had been highly efficient right up to that point, went clean off the air. The whole transmission was repeated later quite perfectly, but some of the glorious excitement had faded.

Of my own stories, the one I remember most vividly is the announcement of the link-up between the American and Russian armies in April 1945. Four radio correspondents had this story ready for broadcasting - three Americans and myself, at General Bradley's headquarters at Bad Wildungen in central Germany. I notified my American friends that as the transmitter, MCP, was BBC property, I should speak first. This they strongly contested, so I went to the Chief of Staff, General Allen. He ruled against me, and in a tense atmosphere - for after all, this was the supreme story of the war so far - we tossed up for the opportunity of being first.

That was my luckiest day, for I was the winner and it meant a very great deal. Mine were the words flashed around the world, and you may detect a special note of triumph in my voice when you reach that item on the cassette.

Men and women who lived through the Second World War will remember all too acutely the agonising preoccupation which that grim and protracted struggle became for all of us. It was a life-or-death matter for our country, and the first requirement of the broadcasting service was that it should continually and scrupulously meet and satisfy the anxious, insatiable demand of the vast listening audience for news and information about the war in all its ramifications. These cassettes, the fascinating and unique by-product of so much effort, shows how that challenge was met.

Frank Gillard
August 1985

Compiled and produced by Mark Jones, Alison Johnston and William Grierson.

Acknowledgement is made to Winston Churchill M.P. and the Decca Record Company for permission to use extracts from Sir Winston Churchill's speeches and to CBS for permission to use Edward R. Murrow's broadcast of 8th May 1940.

Please note that these recordings have been taken from the BBC Sound Archives. Obviously because of their age some deterioration in quality will be noticed. However, we have tried to rectify this throughout while retaining the original nature of the recordings and hope it will not spoil listening pleasure.

Side One

1. Adolf Hitler in Danzig "I am aware of the greatness of this hour". 1.9.39
2. The Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain "This country is at war with Germany". 3.9.39
3. Lionel Marson announces the closing of places of entertainment. 3.9.39
4. . . . and as evacuation begins is pleased to see that the services "are all playing their part splendidly". 1.9.39
5. S.J. De Lotbinière describes the scene at Waterloo Station as London children are evacuated. 1.9.39
6. Princess Elizabeth, aged 14, sends a message to the children of Great Britain. 13.10.40
7. An evacuee, breathless with news, reassures his parents. 10.9.39

8. By a French road Richard Dimbleby watches an Irish regiment move up and finds echoes of the First War "the road, the trees, the rain and the everlasting beat of feet". 15.10.39
9. "War has at all times called for the fortitude of women". Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth stresses the vital role of women in this war. 11.11.39
10. Gas mask drill and an Irish Guard shows the nation how to hold its breath. 8.3.40
11. First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, announces the scuttling of the Graf Spee. 18.12.39
12. The phoney war ends as Alvar Lidell gives news of the German invasion of Denmark and Norway. 9.4.40
13. Ed Murrow witnesses the dramatic 'no confidence' debate in the Commons. 8.5.40
14. Chamberlain resigns "my duty was plain". 10.5.40
15. Churchill makes his first broadcast as Prime Minister "one bond unites us all, to wage war until victory is won". 19.5.40
16. Blitzkrieg begins: Alvar Lidell announces the invasion of Holland and Belgium. 10.5.40
17. Bernard Stubbs watches British troops advance into Belgium to meet the German army. 13.5.40
18. Charles Gardner describes Allied attempts to hold up the German advance north of Antwerp. 14.5.40
19. Sir Anthony Eden, Secretary of State for War, appeals to men to join the local Defence Volunteers - The Home Guard. 14.5.40
20. Bernard Stubbs sees the weary Allied troops coming ashore in England from Dunkirk. 31.5.40
21. J.B. Priestley finds the epic of Dunkirk typically British "so absurd, yet so grand and gallant". 5.6.40
22. Bernard Stubbs watches trains full of silent troops as the B.E.F. come home. 31.5.40
23. Churchill prepares the nation for the Battle of Britain "men will still say, this was their finest hour". 18.6.40
24. Charles Gardner provides a sporty commentary on a dog-fight, even supplying his own sound effects. 14.7.40
25. Robin Duff watches as a convoy is attacked off Dover. 22.8.40
26. Alvar Lidell reads the news at the climax of the Battle of Britain "175 German aircraft destroyed", later a much disputed figure. 15.9.40
27. Churchill pays tribute to 'the few'. 20.8.40 (Recorded 16.9.51)
28. Ed Murrow, standing on the steps of St. Martin in the Fields, watches London cope with the blackout during the blitz. 24.8.40
29. Robin Duff sees the City of London burn and St. Paul's "untouched in the very centre of all this destruction". 20.12.40
30. Herbert Morrison, Minister of Home Security, appeals for firefighters to beat the incendiary menace. 31.12.40
31. Emergency services go into action in London during the blitz. Oct/Nov 1940
32. After the raid on Coventry, Ministry of Information loudspeaker vans advise people on health hazards. 15.11.40

33. The Provost, the Very Reverend R.T. Howard, wearily describes his attempt to save Coventry's Cathedral from incendiary bombs "When men suffer, God suffers also". 15.11.40

Side Two

34. News of the air and sea war and from the Russian Front as 1941 progresses. Best of all is the news that cooked bacon is coming off ration. Bulletin read by Bruce Belfrage (5.1.41), Alan Howland (10.1.41), and Frank Phillips (5.9.41)
35. German radio announces the sinking of H.M.S. Hood. 24.5.41
36. First Sea Lord, A.V. Alexander, gives the news of the Navy's riposte, the sinking of the Bismarck. 31.5.41
37. An excited Robert Dougall, with a convoy in the Atlantic, describes an attack by German bombers. 11.11.41
38. Churchill denounces Hitler as a "blood thirsty guttersnipe" as Germany invades Russia. 22.6.41
39. Alvar Lidell gives the news of a massive air-raid on Berlin. 8.9.41
40. in a Lancaster bomber over Berlin the air crew coolly perform their duties. 3.9.43
41. The Japanese enter the war by attacking Pearl Harbour; Alvar Lidell with the news. 7.12.41
42. Albert Lee Warner in Washington describes American reaction to Pearl Harbour. 7.12.41
43. President Roosevelt expresses American determination. 8.12.41
44. Wilfred Pickles gives news of the war developments in the Far East. 8.12.41
45. In Washington Churchill addresses Congress on Japanese aggression "what kind of a people do they think we are?" 26.12.41
46. Giles Playfair describes the last eerie days in Singapore before its fall. 15.6.42
47. Captain William Graves describes the inferno of the Battle of Midway. 4.6.42
48. At El Alamein General Montgomery meticulously describes the battle to come and promises the Eighth Army that this time they will "finish with this chap Rommel once and for all". Oct. 1942
49. Godfrey Talbot watches British tanks move into battle. 1/2.11.42
50. The barrage at El Alamein begins. 1.11.42
51. Bruce Belfrage reads "some excellent news" from El Alamein. 4.11.42
52. Victory bells ring in Tobruk. 15.11.42
53. Godfrey Talbot describes Christmas in the desert with the Eight Army. 19.12.42
54. On the home front the Radio Doctor offers advice on Christmas Day over-indulgence. 26.12.42
55. Freddie Grisewood suggests ways of saving fuel in the kitchen. 17.8.42
56. Lord Haw-haw (William Joyce) with one of his more eccentric propaganda stories on British women and their hats. 27.2.40
57. Robin Duff samples life in a typical London air-raid shelter. 5.10.40
58. Audrey Russell talks to the shocked survivor of an air-raid which buried her under the wreckage of her house. Nov. 44
59. Robert Robinson reads news of the defeat of the Germans at Stalingrad. 3.2.43

60. Paul Winterton pays tribute to the courage and fortitude of the Russians in Stalingrad. 9.2.43
61. "Yesterday morning the war in North Africa came to an end". Frank Gillard describes the German surrender. 13.5.43
62. Commander Anthony Kimmins sees the preparation of men and ships for the Allied invasion of Sicily. 22.6.43

Side Three

63. Maurice Shillington announces news of the resignation of Mussolini. 25.7.43
64. General Patton enters Messina after its capture. Introduced by Garry Marsh. 17.8.43
65. Frank Gillard introduces the town band of Lentini in Sicily which plays a distinctive 'God Save the Queen'. 22.8.43
66. General Montgomery announces Allied landings on the Italian mainland "Let us knock Italy out of the war". 3.9.43
67. Marshal Badoglio proclaims the Italian capitulation to the Allies. 8.9.43
68. Italy declares war on Germany; news bulletin read by Freddy Grisewood. 13.10.43
69. News of the leaders of the Great Powers meeting in Teheran given by Freddie Grisewood. 6.12.43
70. A night raid on the Anzio beach-head described by Wynford Vaughan-Thomas. 26.1.44
71. During four months on the beach-head at Anzio the Allies make themselves at home, as Wynford Vaughan-Thomas reports. 20.4.44
72. Winston Churchill celebrates Allied victories and looks forward to the ending of "the cruellest tyranny which has ever sought to bar the progress of mankind". 26.3.44
73. Godfrey Talbot surveys Monte Cassino as Polish troops raise their flag over the ruined monastery. 17.5 4
74. Rome welcomes the Allies. 5.6.44
75. Godfrey Talbot sees Allied troops on Mussolini's balcony in the Piazza Venezia. 5.6.44
76. "England has become one vast ordnance dump" Frank Gillard describes the build up of men and material as D-Day approaches. 4.6.44
77. Robin Duff on board a sealed troopship as the invasion forces are told where and when D-Day will take place. 3.6.44
78. Richard Dimbleby watches the airborne troops take off. 5.6.44
79. Robin Duff on board ship in mid-channel with the men "wondering, waiting and listening". 6.6.44
80. "D-Day has come" and John Snagge gives the news, 6.6.44
81. "This is the day and this is the hour" Colin Wills prepares to land with the infantry. 6.6.44
82. Chester Wilmot crosses the Channel in a glider with the airborne forces. 6.6.44
83. Guy Byam parachutes into France with the airborne troops. 8.6.44
84. General Eisenhower broadcasts to the people of Western Europe "The hour of your liberation is approaching". 6.6.44
85. Alan Melville sees Allied paratroops dropping to support the beach-head. 6.6.44

86. Chester Wilmot watches Allied gliders brave the German flak as they come in to land. 6.6.44
87. Frank Gillard takes cover in a Normandy cornfield as German shells whistle overhead. 17.6.44
88. Michael Standing sees French civilians cope with the Allied invasion. 8.6.44
89. Alan Melville tells the story of the Hermanville-sur-Mer church bells as they ring to celebrate liberation. 14.6.44
90. Bill Herbert watches Allied aircraft bomb Caen before the infantry go in. 8.7.44
91. Richard Wessell reads the news "Paris has been liberated". 23.8.44
92. Parisians celebrate liberation with the 'Marseillaise'. 25.8.44
93. Robert Reid describes the scene in Paris "People mad with joy". 25.8.44
94. German snipers fire on de Gaulle as he enters Notre Dame. Robert Reid watches as the General studiously ignores them. 26.8.44
95. On the road into Brussels Chester Wilmot sees an armoured column held up by fierce German resistance. 3.9.44
96. John Snagge gives the news of the Allied Airborne invasion of Holland. 17.9.44
97. Ed Murrow counts the paratroops out as they jump into Holland "the whole sky is filled with parachutes". 17.9.44
98. Stanley Maxted, surrounded with the First Airborne Division, watches "those lovely supply planes" come in over Arnhem "they're such fighters, if only they can get the stuff to fight with". 20.9.44
99. Following the German offensive in the Ardennes, Robert Barr sees the Americans withdraw never thought this would happen to us". 18.12.44
100. Matthew Halton describes conditions in Holland during the last terrible winter of occupation. 19.5.45
101. "The Allies are across the Rhine" Freddie Grisewood announces the seizing of Remagen bridge by the American First Army. 8.3.45

Side Four

102. Wynford Vaughan-Thomas crosses the Rhine with the 15th Scottish Division. 24.3.45
103. Richard Dimbleby crosses the Rhine with "a mighty airborne army" and encounters fierce German resistance. 24.3.45
104. Stanley Maxted goes over the Rhine in a Hamilcar glider with the sixth British Airborne Division and is wounded in the 'doom-like lurch' of the landing. 25.3.45
105. Edward Ward describes "the greatest moment of my life", release from Oflag 12B. 31.3.45
106. Freddie Grisewood introduces Frank Gillard who announces "the forces of liberation have joined hands" as Russian and American troops meet at Torgau on the Elbe. 25.4.45
107. Richard Dimbleby struggles to remain objective as he describes the scenes in Belsen. 19.4.45
108. "Hitler is dead" newsflash read by Stuart Hibberd. 1.5.45
109. Standing in the little village of Lauenberg, Wynford Vaughan-Thomas watches as "the wreckage of the Wehrmacht" streams in to surrender to the Allies. 3.5.45

- 110.Chester Wilmot, at Field Marshal Montgomery's headquarters, waits for the German High Command to surrender. 4.5.45
- 111.Field Marshal Montgomery reads the surrender terms at Lüneberg Heath. 4.5.45
- 112."Yes, I saw it" Thomas Cadell sees General Jodl sign the unconditional surrender at Allied Supreme Headquarters. 7.5.45
- 113.John Snagge interrupts programmes to announce VE Day. 7.5.45
- 114.Howard Marshall, outside Buckingham Palace, joins the crowds "wanting to share this day with the King and Queen". 8.5.45
- 115.The Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, announces the surrender of Germany "we may allow ourselves a brief period of rejoicing". 8.5.45
- 116."I only wish that Franklin D. Roosevelt had lived to witness this day". President Truman expresses a common feeling. 8.5.45
- 117.Lord Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander, South East Asia, tells the forces there "we were never really the forgotten front". 24.12.44
- 118.Sergeant Richard Mawson lands on Iwo Jima with the U.S. Marines "Tojo isn't going to get much use out of this island from here on in". 19.2.45
- 119.Richard Sharp introduces General Slim who congratulates every man in the Fourteenth Army as the Union Jack is raised over Fort Dufferin at Mandalay. 21.3.45
- 120.After a period of recuperation, Sergeant Frank Foster describes conditions during the building of the Burma Siam Railway as a prisoner of the Japanese. 4.1
- 121.Frank Phillips reads news of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. 6.8.45
- 122.Group Captain Leonard Cheshire witnesses the dropping of the second atomic bomb on Nagasaki. 9.8.45
- 123.The Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, announces the surrender of Japan "the last of our enemies is laid low". 15.8.45
- 124.Crowds celebrate VJ Day in London. 15.8.45
- 125.King George VI speaks to the empire "let us join in thanking Almighty God that war has ended throughout the world". 15.8.45
- 126.Wynford Vaughan-Thomas joins the excited crowds in Piccadilly on VJ Day. 15.8.45
- 127.General Douglas MacArthur makes an elegiac broadcast at the end of the war in the Pacific "The holy mission has been completed". 1.9.45