

Veterans Voices – Background Notes to Ian Forsyth's interview

All of the interviews in the Poppy Scotland's VE Day Veterans Voices collection cover a wide range of interesting topics from what life was like between the wars to experiences in WWI through to VE Day and coming home. The following notes provide some additional background information about some of the topics raised in Ian Forsyth's interview <http://learning.poppyscotland.org.uk/veday75/vv-ianforsyth/> as well as links to further information and related videos.

A Military Family (1 min 3 secs)

Life between the World Wars

In order to understand Ian's childhood and wartime experiences it is useful to have some understanding of how the First World War affected Britain and Germany and why this led to him to living in poverty as a child and seeing the horrors of war and a concentration camp as a young man.

The end of WWI - Armistice and the Treaty of Versailles

In the Autumn of 1918, Germany could no longer keep a war going against the Allied Forces. The German Navy had mutinied and the German Army had been defeated. The Kaiser abdicated and the German Government agreed to all the terms that the victorious Allies had asked for. Armistice, (a formal agreement between warring parties to stop fighting), was declared on the 11 November 1918.

In 1919 the conditions that Germany had to agree to in the final 'peace agreement' was signed. It was called The Treaty of Versailles. Unfortunately, the Treaty was drawn up without consulting the Germans or smaller Allied countries and was much harsher than the original conditions agreed at the Armistice. It included the following key conditions:

1. The 'war guilt' clause meant that Germany had to take full responsibility for the war, even though they were not the only ones to blame.
2. Germany's 'guilt' meant that they to pay for all of the damage and losses that the war cost the Allied countries. This was called 'reparation'.
3. All it's colonies and the land that it had gained through the war was to be given to the Allied nations. This meant that population and territory of Germany was reduced by about 10 percent
4. Germany was to disarm so that it could never pose a military threat to the rest of Europe again. Its army was reduced to 100,000 men. It was forbidden to produce tanks, armoured cars, airplanes, poisoned gas and only a few small factories could produce ammunition or weapons.

The Germans were very unhappy about these unexpected and very unforgiving additions to the peace agreement but they had no choice and had to sign. Italy was also unhappy because it was not given the large areas of land that it had been promised. Thus, the foundations for the Second World War were laid.

- The Treaty of Versailles <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=74-HkCRozls>

- Treaty of Versailles <https://www.britannica.com/event/Treaty-of-Versailles-1919>
- The First World War - <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/collection/the-first-world-war>. An online BFI collection of films from the home front to the front line: life during the “war to end all wars” as seen through the lens of newsreel, propaganda and drama. It includes films made and shown in Britain between 1914 and 1918. After WWI, Armistice Day and Remembrance ceremonies were often caught on film, while British cinema produced epic dramas addressing the experiences of the Great War into the 1920s and beyond.

Life in Britain and Germany in the 1920s

Victory came at a huge human and economic cost to Britain. 745,000 servicemen and 24,000 civilians were killed and 1.7 million wounded. The war had cost billions of pounds to the Empire and there were huge losses in ships, that would need to be replaced. Whilst Germany was going to pay for the costs, Britain was in debt to the US for loans that had helped to pay for the war in the first place. Moreover, the British Empire started to decline as its colonies started to look to their own independence and nationalism began to rise.

In Britain there was a post-war economic boom due to the rebuilding of ships and infrastructure but it was very short-lived and by 1921 the country was in a serious economic depression. To try to reduce its ever-increasing debts the Government imposed massive cuts and austerity measures. As part of this the army budget was cut from £799 million in 1919 – 1920 to £189 million the following year. The army was cut by more than half. Suddenly men who were regular soldiers (as opposed to conscripted soldiers) and had been fighting new conflicts around the world, found themselves unemployed. For military families such as Ian's this would have been devastating. The men would have found it difficult to find work because of high unemployment. Life would have been very hard. The little money that Ian was able to earn as a child would have been important in helping the family survive.

British industry declined due to a fall in exports as Japan and the US took over important markets for British goods. This combined with the Government's monetary policies led to, high wage costs, cheap consumer prices, massive deflation and high interest rates. Employers couldn't afford to pay staff because of the poor prices they were getting for their products so people were laid off and unemployment rose. This in turn led to the Miners' Strike in 1925 and the General Strike in 1926. The British economy was depressed for the rest of the decade.

Meanwhile in Germany in the early 1920's the reparation payments almost caused the country to become bankrupt. Its currency became worthless and millions of people were living in poverty. There were strikes, social unrest, threats of revolution and a growing distrust of the Government. Extremist groups, including Adolf Hitler's National Socialists (Nazi), fostered resentment of the war guilt clause and the vast amount of money that had to be paid to the Allied countries. The country was descending into chaos. However, in 1924, the Government changed direction. It negotiated new terms of repayment with the Allies and introduced a new

currency. Through solid economic and financial reforms, the German economy was transformed and booming. By end of the 1920s the country beginning to re-integrate with the international community and was politically stable.

- The rise and fall of the Weimar Republic, 1918–33
<https://www.britannica.com/place/Germany/Germany-from-1918-to-1945>

The Wall Street Crash, the Great Depression and the rise of Hitler

All might have been well but in 1929, the Wall Street Crash happened. This massive collapse of the US stock market led to the US calling in the huge loans it had given to European countries. This had a crippling effect on the European economy. It led to the collapse of European banks and a general world financial crisis. This was known as the Great Depression. In Britain it led to continued high unemployment, poverty and austerity measures. In Germany, the economic crisis meant the collapse of output and subsequent high unemployment. Hitler and his Nazi Party, blamed the Allies for the severe terms of the Versailles Treaty and the high cost of the reparations. They also targeted the government for agreeing to the Armistice and for the economic problems of the early 20s. Much of the blame was directed at the Jews. Jewish bankers were accused of creating past economic problems and the present ones. The idea of a racial pure nation was promoted. The popularity of the Nazi Party grew.

In 1933, Hitler became Chancellor, even though the Nazi Party did not have a majority in Government. Thereafter, through intimidation and violence, the Nazis were able to introduce laws and amend the Constitution so that civil liberties were abolished and Hitler was given the power to make laws without Reichstag approval. Hitler was no longer the leader of a democracy, he was a dictator.

Over the next few years, Nazi Germany torn away at the agreements of the Treaty of Versailles. It reintroduced conscription and began to build up its army again and to rearm. By 1936, Hitler began to expand the German territories and to reoccupy lands in contravention of the Treaty. Italy's leader Mussolini allied with Hitler. In response to Hitler's obvious aggressive ambitions, Britain and France began to prepare for war. On the 1 September 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Britain and France declared war on Germany on the 3 September. The Second World War had begun.

- The Wall Street Crash https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4qs_Ca_aaNk
- Stock Market Crash of 1929 <https://www.britannica.com/event/stock-market-crash-of-1929>
- Adolf Hitler <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Adolf-Hitler>
- Hitler in Berlin (1936) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOEfL4k_zF8
- German Troops March Into Austria (1938) Hitler in Berlin (1936) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOEfL4k_zF8
- Italians Goosestep for Hitler Version A <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUKBGqUubMI>

Harsh Reality (2 mins 51 secs)

On the 6 June 1944 Allied Forces landed on the beaches of Normandy, on the northern coast of France. The Normandy Landings were the first part of Operation Overlord, a massive, co-ordinated invasion of northern France by the Allies in order to establish a stronghold from which to push the Germans back.

Planning for the invasion began in 1943. A 50 mile stretch of coast in Normandy was identified as being suitable for landing over a million British, Canadian, American, Polish and French troops all under overall British command. The coast was divided into five sectors: Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno and Sword. American forces were assigned to land on Omaha and Utah beaches, the Canadians on Juno Beach and the British on Gold and Sword beaches. Ian landed on Gold Beach.

Gold Beach was the code name for the middle beach of the five designated landing areas of the Normandy Landings in WWII. It was invaded and taken from defending German troops by units of the British 50th Infantry Division. The objectives of the 50th Division were to cut the Caen-Bayeux highway, take the port of Arromanches, the Longues battery from the rear. link up with the Americans from Omaha Beach to the west and the Canadians from Juno Beach to the east.

The area was well defended by German Forces occupying the towns and house along the coast and heavily protected observation post on top of a steep cliff that directed the fire of a battery of four 155-mm guns located a kilometre inland from the beach.

H-Hour (the time the first assault wave was to land) at Gold Beach was set for 0725 hours, one hour later than the scheduled landings on Utah and Omaha beaches due to the direction of the tide, brought high water later to the British beach. But the strong wind on that morning brought the tides in more quickly. The obstacles that the Germans had laid on the shoreline were therefore under water before British demolition teams could get to them. Worst still. the teams came under fire from the beach, so that they were unable to clear the obstacles. The first landing craft to land were carrying tanks; 20 of them struck mines, suffering moderate to severe damage.

Fortunately for the British, most of the German strongpoints had been destroyed by shore bombardment earlier in the morning so there was no German armour on the beach, and the infantry resistance was ineffective.

By the evening of June 6, the 50th Division had landed 25,000 men, taken the towns of La Rivière and Le Hamel, moved 10 km inland, joined up with the Canadians from Juno Beach and reached the heights above Port-en-Bessin. It had not cut the Caen-Bayeux highway or linked up with the Americans from Omaha Beach, but it had made a good start. The British suffered 400 casualties while securing their beachhead.

- Encyclopaedia Britannica: Gold Beach
<https://www.britannica.com/place/Gold-Beach>
- D-Day ww2 1944: Normandy in Operation Overlord (in Colour)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UZU79tAzMU>

Liberating Europe and defeating Germany

The Normandy Landings were the just the start of the military operation to liberate Europe and defeat Germany. The Battle of Normandy was difficult and the losses on both sides were high. British Forces bore the brunt of German resistance. However, by the end of August the Germans were in full retreat out of France. However, they were able to regroup by September and the Allied advance stalled over winter. Come Spring and improved weather, the Allies pushed forward and by April 1945, the British, US and Canadian troops joined up with the Russians on the Elbe. The Germans surrendered on 7 May 1945.

- Time To Remember - The Last Winter 1944 – 1945
Reel 1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CM0VUQsXIMk>
Reel 2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0vlvg0qmRnA>
Reel 3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMrhSGWYsNg>
Reel 4 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2QPPJ1oA9s>
- It Happened In Paris: WWII Nazi Occupation (1942 & 1944) | British Pathé
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t1LdRmFZdnU>
- Paris Delivered (1944) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUz2XvgalEo>
- Entry Into Brussels aka Brussels delivered (1944)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFVK7bGU-7g>
- Defeat and Deliverance (1945)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMs8tfP8Re0>
- The British Army Enter Berlin (1945) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CG-jspYRkco>

Belsen (4 mins 14 secs)

Concentration camps

The Nazi policies of racism and political ideology were immediately put into practice as soon as Hitler became Chancellor. In 1933, many Jews, Gypsies, people with physical or mental disabilities, LGBTQ individuals, intellectuals, artists, communists, Polish and other Slavic people, political opponents, clergymen, Jehovah's Witnesses and any people deemed 'socially deviant' were sent to concentration camps. These were internment camps for 'undesirables'. They were a way of removing political opposition as well as people who the Nazis deemed to be inferior. The threat of the concentration camps was one way of intimidating the German population into submission.

Once war began, more and more men, women and children were sent concentration camps to be enslaved as part of the war effort. It is estimated that there were almost 15,000 Nazi camps across occupied Europe. Many were

operated for a limited amount of time, serving only as holding camps for the local Jewish population until they could be transported to larger camps. Many camps were labour camps, located close to factories where prisoners were sent to work until they died of starvation, dehydration, disease, overwork or were executed. Thousands of people never even made it as far as the camps. Instead they were put to death en masse by the German Security Police and Security Service (SD) working in conjunction with the German domestic police force across the occupied territories. It is estimated that between June 1941 and the end of the war, the SD murdered over 2 million people, over half of whom were Jews.

By 1942, a more systematic programme of mass murder to address the 'Total Solution of the Jewish Question' was put into place. This involved transporting Jewish populations in German-occupied countries to labour and extermination camps in Poland where they would be worked to death or murdered immediately.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum memorial to the Holocaust states 'The Holocaust was the murder of six million Jews and millions of others by the Nazis and their collaborators during World War II.' The museum puts the total number of murdered during the Holocaust at 17 million: 6 million Jews and 11 million others.

The camps were liberated by the Allied forces between 1944 and 1945. Bergen-Belsen was liberated by the British on April 15.

Bergen-Belsen

Bergen-Belsen was originally a prisoner of war camp. In 1943 part of it became a concentration camp to hold Jewish hostages who were to be exchanged for German prisoners of war held overseas. Later it was expanded to accommodate more Jews from other camps.

Bergen-Belsen was not an extermination camp. There were no gas chambers. However, thousands did die not only from the overcrowded and inhumane conditions that led to starvation and diseases such as dysentery, tuberculosis, typhus and typhoid fever, but also from torture and execution by guards and experimentation by SS scientists. Amongst those known to have died in the camp were the Dutch teenage diarist Anne Frank and the Czech painter and writer Josef Čapek.

When it was liberated there were approximately 60,000 prisoners inside, most of them half-starved and seriously ill. They had not had food or water for several days and hundreds were dying each day from typhus. 13,000 corpses lay unburied. Over the next few days the inmates were moved to a new camp and the disease-ridden camp they had left behind was burned to the ground, but not before the former SS soldiers had been made to bury the dead in mass graves.

The SS commanders destroyed many of their records but British military photographers and cameramen documented the conditions in the camp and these images were seen across the world. The public now saw the horrors of the German concentration camps and the name Bergen-Belsen became synonymous with Nazi crimes.

- Susan Pollack on liberation of Bergen-Belsen <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d27dB6MN3lc>
- Bergen-Belsen liberated 70 years ago <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-32314300/bergen-belsen-liberated-70-years-ago>
- Belsen survivor meets liberator <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-32255966/bergen-belsen-survivor-reunited-with-one-of-camp-liberators>
- Josef Čapek <https://karelcapek.cz/en/life-and-creation/josef-capek>
- The Anne Frank Foundation <https://www.annefrank.org/en/>

Refeeding Syndrome

The horrors of the concentration camps were new to the soldiers liberating them. Despite being told not to feed the inmates, the shocked soldiers handed over their rations to them, not realising that in doing so they could be killing them. When a person has not had food for a long time, their body adapts to the conditions and uses its muscle tissue and fat stores as an energy source to survive. It is no longer able to take food in by mouth. If that person tries to eat normally, the delicate balance the body has maintained is overwhelmed. The body's depleted nutrient store is unable to supply the minerals needed to keep the body functioning as well as processing the food intake. This is called refeeding syndrome and can lead to abnormal heart rhythms, confusion, coma, convulsions, heart failure and death.

Over the next few weeks specialist army medical teams tried to find ways to feed the starved inmates and were credited with reducing the death rate of the inmates. However, despite their best efforts and the hard work of the other medical teams who treated the camp survivors, almost 14,000 people died after liberation succumbing to the diseases, malnutrition and injuries they could no longer endure.

Homecoming (6 mins 23 secs)

Living with the trauma of war

Young men coming back after the war in Europe, Africa and the Far East had been through terrible traumas that they couldn't possibly have been prepared for. Whilst in a conflict situation, such as war, they would have focussed on just surviving and staying alive. However, once the danger was gone, they would have had time to reflect and remember what they had experienced. At the time, talking about these experiences was not socially acceptable. Society wanted to move on and, for men in particular, mental illness was seen as a weakness. However, without being able to talk about such experiences, their mental health would have suffered. For some this might have led to anxiety, depression and possibly post-traumatic stress (PTS).

Thankfully today, people have a much better understanding and acceptance of mental illness. This is really important for people who are suffering from mental illness. If they are able to talk about their condition and their feelings and be

listened to, there is a good chance that they can recover. For many veterans of WWII, the mental anguish they suffered after the war never stopped. Luckily for Ian, he met someone who he could talk to and who helped support him through his recovery.

- The long echo of WW2 trauma
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-48528841>

Nowadays there is much more support and information for anyone experiencing mental health issues and for their families to help them recover.

- Combat Stress – www.combatstress.org.uk - a charity that supports veterans' mental health
- Rock 2 Recovery <https://rock2recovery.co.uk> – a charity that aims to promote positive change in the Armed Forces, veterans communities and their families when they are affected by stress.
- Childline – online and phone helpline 24/7 for children and young people Tel. 0800 111 or www.childline.org.uk
- MIND has dedicated pages specifically for children and young people <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/for-children-and-young-people/>
- Shout is a 24/7 direct messaging service for anyone in crisis anytime. To get help from a Crisis Volunteer TEXT CIN to 85258. For more information visit www.giveusashout.org
- Parent Zone www.parentzone.org.uk for provides online resources for parents, carers and schools about digital and online safety as well as health & wellbeing, sex & relationships and LGBTQ+.
- Mental Health helplines. This NHS page lists online helplines for a range of different mental health conditions and specific sites for Men and also for young people <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mental-health-helplines/>

Looking back (8mins 14 secs)

Learning from history

Ian volunteered to tell the story of his experiences so that people can learn more about the realities of war. As a very young man, he realised that war is not an adventure but war involves death, destruction, deprivation and horrific cruelty. He found out the hard way that war does not solve problems.

Ian urges that we talk and listen to each other and solve our disagreements with kindness and understanding. We cannot all agree on everything. We must respect others opinions and be open to their points of view. Since WWII, wars have continued to rage across the world and Britain has been involved in several of them. However, there are many world organisations who are working hard to promote disarmament and establish World Peace:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_anti-war_organizations