

500 Words or Less Reviews: The War

Filmmaker Ken Burns is probably most famous for creating the documentary miniseries, *The Civil War* (1990), and for good reason. It is a documentary masterpiece. In the years since he has made several other series on a variety of other historical subjects. Hoping to recapture the magic of *The Civil War*, my sister and I recently watched his 2007 World War II series *The War*. While it did not match *The Civil War* in thoroughness or filmmaking magic, *The War* was nonetheless extremely good.

As for the thoroughness, the film is clear about its limited scope and its rationale for such. Each episode is introduced with these two lines: "The Second World War was fought in thousands of places, too many for any one accounting. This is the story of four American towns and how their citizens experienced that war." I would not be a bit surprised to learn that he put this here specifically because test audiences kept complaining that the series was a limited look at World War II. In effect, these two lines explained that World War II was so huge that it would be impossible to give a complete look at it in a mere seven-episode series. No, instead it looked at multiple stages of the war as seen through the eyes of Americans from Waterbury, Conn.; Sacramento, Calif.; Mobile, Ala.; and Luverne, Minn.

All of the commentaries are people from one of these towns and were individuals who either fought in the war or normal American citizens who were drastically affected by the war in various ways. Unlike *The Civil War*, there is no commentary by experts like historians. The people who lived these things are the only experts we get. This is just fine because hearing the testimonies of these people who actually lived it makes it more real, more poignant. It gives audiences a closer, more emotional, look at things like the plight of Japanese

Americans; life in America during World War II; life for Americans imprisoned by the Japanese in a Philippine internment camp; and, of course, soldiers who fought in the war on a multiplicity of fronts.

Although most of them are not technical experts in any historical area, the selection of those individuals who commented was excellent casting. All of the now elderly people chosen had a kind of indescribable charm, a respectability, an impeccably honorable essence. Even more so, for obvious reasons each of them clearly felt deeply about the subject matter. It was this that more than anything else added to the enrichment of this story. They were *The War's* secret weapon. The seven episodes will take you on a journey all over the world through the eyes of these American citizens who lived and saw the horror, saw the greatness, experienced the time that changed their lives and impacted the world forever.