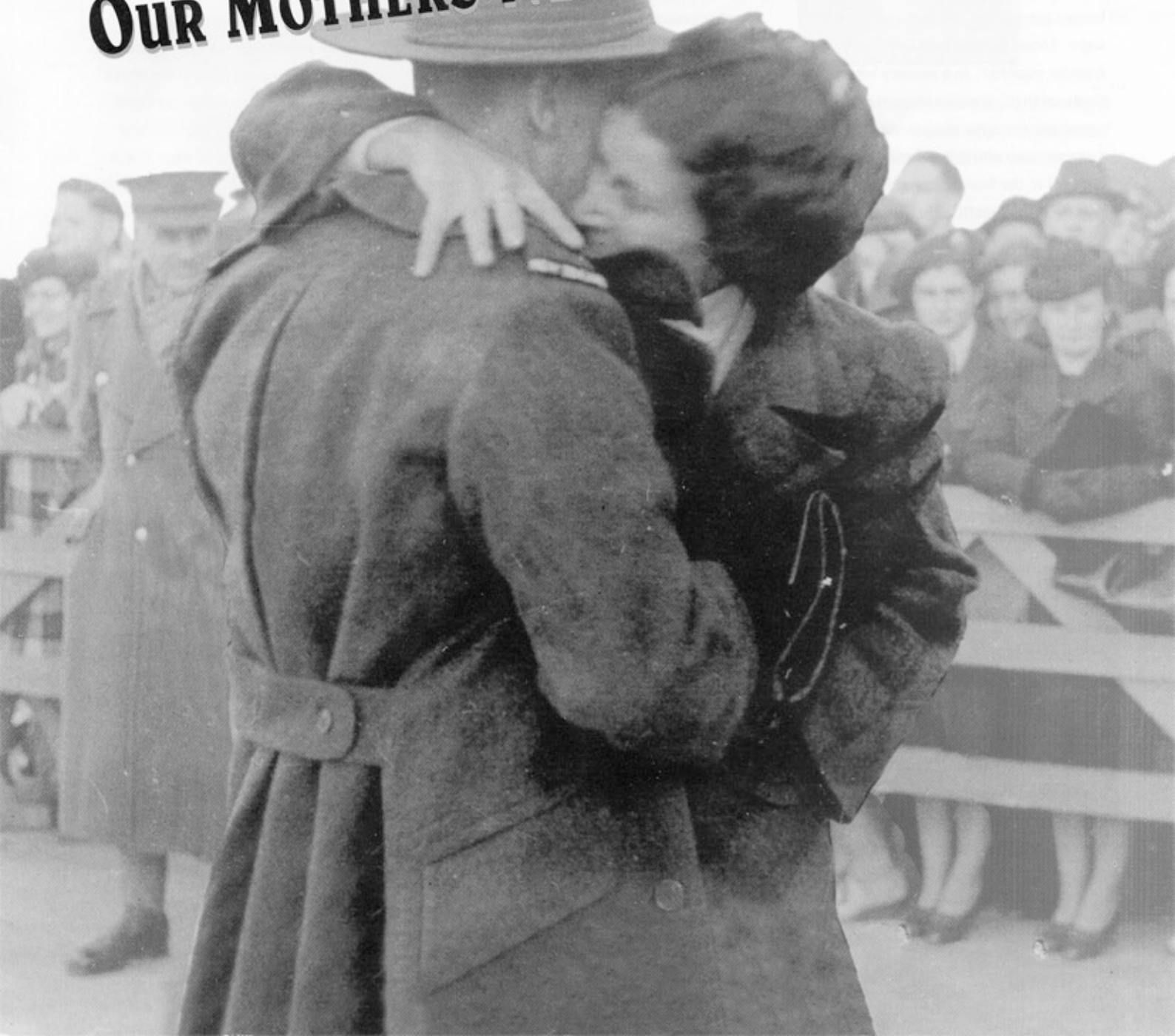


STUDY GUIDE

WAR STORIES

OUR MOTHERS NEVER TOLD US



Introduction The seven New Zealand women whose stories are the subject of this feature documentary tell us about their lives during World War II with great honesty, and with no apologies. The women share their personal experiences – bitter-sweet tales of grief, laughter, separation and loneliness – tales about life and love.

When war broke out in 1939, New Zealand had a small population – just over 1.5 million. Over the war years 1939-45, thousands of young men left to fight a war raging in places hardly any of them had even heard of. Most of the women stayed behind and found their lives changed by the circumstances of the war.

Many of the experiences of these years were to become secrets as the social order changed and left exposed private fears and public prejudices. Sayings that became well known across New Zealand and Australia were, 'Loose tongues cost lives', and 'Keep it under your hat'. In a country where not a shot was fired, wartime slogans in a strange way came to mirror the private reality for many women who felt obliged to send the boys off to the front 'happy', and to entertain the American servicemen on leave from the Pacific.

Many women, bringing up small children on their own, suffered from the double standards of the time which created an enormous rift between public and personal realities.

Then the boys came home. Nothing was the same. The experience had changed them as well as the women. How things were, was not how they were meant to be, and an entire generation of New Zealanders, in a desperate bid to recreate 'normal' lives, have in unspoken collusion, kept an enormous secret. Now in their late 70s and 80s, against a backdrop of still montages and archival film footage, and surrounded by the music they all danced to, these women have told their stories.

Curriculum links The film is a resource which will be of relevance to teachers and secondary students of History, English, Social Studies and Media Studies. It will be particularly interesting to students who are engaging

in oral history projects and war studies. Students in any Commonwealth country should be able to trace links and similarities between the experiences of the New Zealand women and women in their own country. Students of History and English will find that many of the suggested activities will have relevance to both subjects.

Historical background

To understand the lives and stories of these women, you need to have some background knowledge of what happened during the war, both at the front and on the home front.

World War II began when Britain declared war on Germany in 1939, and Commonwealth countries including New Zealand and Australia once again saw themselves as bound to support 'the mother country' as they had in other conflicts.

- What did this mean? Why did so many thousands of young New Zealanders and Australians rush to enlist and see it as their patriotic duty? You could answer this question either by doing some library research or by asking older people who lived through this period.

At first the war had very little impact on Australians and New Zealanders. In the European winter of 1939, there was little military action, and this period came to be known as 'The Phoney War'. But in 1940, Hitler invaded Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and then in May, France was invaded.

The British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, pledged his people to wage war by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all our strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime'.

In July and August 1940, the German Luftwaffe began a massive air attack on Britain. In the famous 'Battle of Britain' the R.A.F. were the victors. Also in 1940, Mussolini declared war on Britain and France, and launched attacks in Egypt and Albania. British Commonwealth forces fought in desert campaigns which destroyed one-sixth of the Italian army.

Australian and New Zealand forces also fought in Greece, and Syria.

In 1940 and 1941 President Roosevelt increased the support of the United States of America to Britain and her allies. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour on December 7, 1941, the Pacific phase of the war began. This led to a greatly increased number of American soldiers in Australia and New Zealand. In the years 1941 to 1945, New Zealand soldiers were spread around the globe, and on the home front life was changed in many ways. The women fought their own war, running the farms and the towns, caring for their children alone, and often coping with great tragedy.

- As a class exercise, construct a time line on the classroom wall which provides more details on the events of the war and tells more of the story from 1941 until the end of the European war and the Pacific war in 1945. You could also divide your class into groups to investigate aspects of the conflict in various parts of the world. And then in 1945, the survivors came home. Part of *War Stories Our Mothers Never Told Us* is the story of what it was like for these seven women after the years of coping alone.

Useful References for research and wider reading

- The Australian documentary *Thanks Girls and Goodbye*, directed by Sue Hardisty and Sue Maslin, is an excellent study of women's experiences during World War II, in the Women's Land Army. The documentary is available from Ronin Films. Tel. (06) 248 0851
- Beryl Sandford and Betty Goldsmith, (1990) 'The girls left behind, life in Australia during World War 2 – the women remember', Penguin Books.
- Patsy Adam Smith, (Melbourne, 1978) 'The Anzacs'
- Gammage, B. 'Australians and the Great War' in *Journal of Australian Studies*. No.6, June 1980.
- Gammage, B. (Canberra 1974) 'The Broken Years'
- Mckernan, M. (Melbourne, 1980) 'Australians in Wartime', Nelson.

After watching the film

Each of the women in the film has their own particular story to tell first hand. It was the purpose of the filmmaker to focus specifically on what was unique about their personal stories rather than the broad experiences of people on the home front in New Zealand.

Begin your study by analysing each person's story either as individuals, in pairs or as group work. Answer the individual questions first and then think about what was common amongst these women and what was different in their experiences.



Pamela Pamela was a popular light amateur musical singer, who fell madly in love with Paul, a young pilot. He went to England when war broke out and flew in the Battle for Britain. Pamela had to meet with the NZ Prime Minister to gain special permission to travel to England to marry Paul. Carrying her bridal gown, going-away suit and wedding cake, Pamela eventually arrived in England and married Paul.

- Why didn't she wear her wedding dress when she was married?
- What does this tell you about social mores of the time? What other evidence does Pamela provide of different social attitudes at the time?
- When you have watched the stories of all the women, explain other ways in which social life was different in the second world war from today.

Pamela says, 'It was all a dream ... I just wafted through it.' One year later, Pamela

had a baby girl, Penny, and then Paul was missing in action. Unwilling to believe him dead, 'he was just too full of initiative to die', she finally reluctantly boarded the last free boat home.

- What kind of suffering would Pamela have endured?
- How did Pamela finally hear that Paul had died?
- What happened to Pamela when she returned to NZ?
- In an empathy activity, try to write either a dialogue Pamela may have had with her friend in Sussex or a diary entry where she pours out her thoughts and feelings when she has found out that Paul is missing.
- If you know someone who has lost a relative in wartime who is willing to speak about their feelings at the time, compare how you have interpreted Pamela's experience with that situation. Present your conclusions orally.



Flo Flo's story begins with the description of how people began to realise that this was a serious war, and 'our boys were going to die', 'before it was like a fairy story...' Flo tells of the reality of death: 'You cry and you go into a bedroom where someone's been and all of a sudden you don't know what to do.'

She was 26 years old when her father brought home two young Americans he'd met on the wharf. In those days people were very prejudiced against the Ameri-



cans. But Flo was courted by and eventually married Warren.

- Why were American soldiers stationed in New Zealand?
- What do you think it would have been like for them to have been living in New Zealand?
- Try to find out and explain why people were prejudiced? You may find some of the answers by speaking to people who lived at the time or you may need to do some research.

Did you know that...?

In Australia, the American presence actually led to a riot known as the 'Battle of Brisbane'. Queensland, with a population of 1.3 million, felt the strain as a million American servicemen arrived and set up camps throughout the state. It led to local jealousy from the Australian men, and even food shortages. Thousands married, sometimes in a rush to the altar in final leaves before the ships sailed.

- What might have been some of the implications of these 'rushed weddings' in the short and longer term?
- Read some of the experiences of 'The girls they left behind', Goldsmith and Sandford, Penguin, 1990.
- Find out more about the American presence in your local area.
- What impressions do we get of Flo's neighbour?

Flo's story is one of suffering and abuse. Warren's ship was torpedoed before their child, Stéphane, was born, and Flo was left to cope with the prejudice.

- Why do you think people made comments like: 'I thought she'd be black.... They've all got nigger blood'
- What evidence does Flo provide of other anti-American attitudes?

Tui Tui's story was one of loss, love and loneliness. When war was declared, Ed was like her brother, but as the time for his departure into the army came closer, their relationship became sexual. When Tui knew she was pregnant, she 'didn't want to get married ... but you had to'. Tui 'was deeply hurt that he wouldn't stay' because they 'had become



very close'. Five months after their wedding and her husband's departure, Tui had a baby boy. When he was about a year old, Tui received news that Ed was missing in action and presumed to be a POW. Years passed with very little communication. So Tui settled into a new life and fell in love with a colleague at work. He wanted her to leave Ed, but when he returned, Tui feared that she would lose her son if she didn't go back to him: 'In those days, women had no rights'. She broke off her relationship and began the difficult task of rebuilding her marriage to someone who was now a complete stranger.

- Retell the story of what it was like for Tui when she met Ed at the station?
- How can you explain her son's reaction to his father?
- Suggest ways in which long separations can affect relationships?
- Construct a dialogue and role play the story from Ed's perspective.
- Tui said, 'We sort of stumbled through ... it was a terrible time ... it took years ... he was just my mate and I was his'. Explain in more detail what you think she was saying about their relationship.
- Write Ed's version of his departure and returning in what you suspect is the way that a man of his time might have expressed himself.

Jean Jean tells of living in the middle of the 'American invasion' of Paekakariki. A Maori woman of Ngati Raukawa/ Te Atiawa tribal descent, Jean was married with two young daughters when the



Americans came. Her family was moved from the marae which was taken by the government for war use, and moved into Otaki into a 'big pakeha house'. This house became the social centre away from camp for hundreds of Americans and Auntie Jean became the unofficial camp mother. She gave warmth, love and friendship to thousands, and was one of only a handful of women world-wide to be made an honorary Marine. Forty-six thousand American servicemen passed through the camp between 1942 and 1945. Jean and her fellow workers washed and starched and ironed their white dress uniforms. She tells of tired servicemen, of some who died of fevers they brought back with them from the war zone, and of a training accident which killed at least a hundred men. She helped to collect the bodies and roll them in blankets to be collected by the American military authorities.

- Jean reveals a great deal about her values and attitudes in the story. Write a description of Jean which includes her thoughts on racism, officers, colour, etc.
- What impression does she create of the social life at the time?
- Auntie Jean doesn't talk much about her personal life. Why do you think this is? What does it tell you about the kind of person she is? Do you think because she is a Maori telling her story to a predominantly non-Maori world has anything to do with the way she chose to tell her story?
- Auntie Jean has her own way of using the English language. Choose a small part of



her story and write down exactly what she says. Why is it easy to understand when you hear it but looks strange when written down? Record a friend telling a story then write it down verbatim. Do we really speak English?

- Find out the meaning of phrases such as: 'tommy rot'; 'slimy limeys'; 'baboon'; 'looking like young lamb and they're old hoggets'; 'we maybe black on the outside but we're white at heart'; 'whang'; 'drank like a fish'; 'got the pips up'
- How does the slang of a particular period reflect the social attitudes of the time? Choose some equivalent slang that you might use.
- Auntie Jean says that the 103 American Servicemen drowned off the shore of New Zealand unloading tanks for practice manoeuvres were called 'killed in action' by the military authorities. Do you think this is a fair way to describe these deaths? Give reasons for and against. *War Stories: Our Mothers Never Told Us* is dedicated to Jean, who died in 1994.



Rita When Rita married Alan she knew her husband was a Christian Pacifist, but paid little attention to the implications of this. But a month after their daughter Heather was born, Alan was sent into detention for the duration of the war. His mother and hers didn't cope very well with his Pacifist stand and wouldn't say that he was a conscientious objector. Though Rita was



unable to own up to Alan's whereabouts, she felt disloyal if she didn't tell the truth.

- What is a Pacifist?
- Why would people have been particularly critical of Pacifists in World War 2?
- Investigate the different ways in which people in your city or town supported the war effort.
- How did the bank staff help Rita?
- Heather's tragic death caused more suffering for Rita. How did she react and feel at the time?
- When Rita finally found the courage to admit that her husband was a conscientious objector in detention, it helped her. How can you explain this?



Neva

Neva's story tells of great sadness followed by the experiences of an army servicewoman serving overseas. She was engaged at 18 to a young air cadet who was killed in 1942, almost straight away. She has never fully recovered from the grief. Neva was posted to Egypt and Italy, and was very close to the fighting lines. She was faced with the additional physical dangers that women faced at the front lines, including being raped. She tells of being one of only a handful of women in an army of homesick and romance-starved men.

- What sorts of traumas do you think Neva would have helped the men through?

- Neva says she felt angry a lot of the time. How can you explain that?

Neva has kept a full diary of the war years and every love letter that was ever written to her. Her Scottish fiancé was also killed days before the war ended. She is still angry about the futility of war. When she returned home, 'The neighbours thought we just had a wonderful time. One of them said to me, 'now I suppose you will settle down and get married' – 'I wanted to kill her. They had absolutely no idea what we had been through.

- Write a series of questions which will lead into research about women in the forces. These questions could include issues such as:
 - How many women went into the services in various Commonwealth countries? Where did they go? What were their experiences? Find out how much their experiences were similar to or different from Neva's?
 - What kinds of difficulties do you think Neva would have had settling into civilian life again?

Mabel Mabel had one small son when her husband joined the Maori Battalion. Mabel describes the Ngatihine community with all the men away. She was the only one left who had a licence to drive a truck. Her son stopped eating since he was fretting for his father, so she had to set off, with her little son beside her, driving the school bus and the family truck.

- Do you think Mabel liked doing the work?
- What are your impressions of Mabel's character.

Mabel experienced the sadness in small Maori communities as the Maori battalion suffered enormous losses. Tangis were held without the body, only a photo.

- What is a 'Tangi'?
- What evidence is there in Mabel's story of very strong Maori culture?
- Explain the various ways people cope with grief and hold funerals.

Although he hadn't seen his father for three years, Mabel's son was able to recognise his father amongst hundreds of others on the wharf. He went up to him during the welcoming ceremony and



wrapped himself around his father's leg. It was five minutes later when he saw Mabel in the crowd that he said to the Colonel, 'This must be my son'

- Write an imaginary dialogue in which you are the son or daughter of a returned serviceman describing how you feel when you see your father again or imagine that you are the father seeing your child. Present these dialogues in class and talk about how accurate you think your presentations are?

The Maori people are a warrior race with rituals in which the whole community welcome soldiers back home, acknowledging the pain and grief of war and rejoicing at the return of survivors.

- Compare the way the Maori Battalion returned to their own communities and the way the regular soldiers returned. (Refer to Tui's and Neva's stories and consider the different psychological impact of both returnings.
- How were Aboriginal soldiers incorporated into the Australian Army? Was there an equivalent to the Maori Battalion? Find out some facts about the Aboriginal experience of World War 2.

Media studies The film uses a mixture of filmed material and various techniques to recreate the stories and to capture the atmosphere and emotions of the time. The film uses 16mm, 35mm, colour and black & white sequences. This presented a technically demanding challenge because the director was keen to fine-cut the film. All the archival footage has a mono soundtrack with commentary and music combined.

- Look again at each woman's story. Record the various ways the story has been woven together? What images and scenes are used by the filmmaker?
- What types of music and sound effects are used, and how do they add to the storytelling?
- When the women are being interviewed, the filmmaker chooses a particular style of presentation. Explain how these segments are presented and how effective they are?
- The background documentary sections focusing on broader aspects of the war broadens our understanding of each woman's story. Do you agree?
- Try to view other films of the Second World War which are 'documentary' rather than 'feature' films. What is the difference?
- There are many newsreel extracts in the film. Make a list of the segments which you can identify as newsreels. What is the content? How are the news items portrayed? What similarities and differences are there when you compare them with film reports today?



This study guide was written for ATOM by Libby Tudball

- There are many films which could be categorised as 'War films'. Survey some of these films and evaluate the focus and themes of these films, the way the stories are constructed, how women's roles are portrayed, and how accurate they are as a representation of people's lives during the war?
- *War Stories: Our Mothers Never Told Us* represents the Second World War in very unique ways. Write a review of the film for a newspaper which explains how the film has been constructed, and the strengths and weaknesses of the film.

Oral history There are some important points that you should remember if your class decides to do some oral research and interviews:

- Prepare all questions in advance and have them written out so that the interviewee can have a copy.
- Be tactful, and remember that some people may have some memories which are too painful or too personal to share.
- Try to answer this question: Why are some of these stories only being told for the first time?
- If you plan to make any of the stories you uncover public, seek the permission of the people you talk to first.
- Use tape recorders only if your interviewee agrees.
- Try to check the accuracy of the stories you uncover by cross referencing to historical documents.

Drawing it altogether

- Divide your class up into groups to consider each woman's story from the man's point of view. The Director, Gaylene Preston, says that the men's stories were told very differently. They were recounted loudly, with a beer in one hand, a rollick in the other and eruptions of laughter. Write a script for a scene with a group of men telling their war stories in a public group, and another where they tell their private thoughts about their wives and children. Talk about the conclusions you draw.
- What had changed after the war? In answering this question, consider attitudes to marriage, women in the work force, family roles etc. Ask your own and other grandmothers for the answers to these questions.
- While these stories cover a range of war experiences, they are not totally representative of all women. Whose stories are not told here?
- Every person who has lived through wartime has a story to tell. What did your grandparents and great grandparents do during the war? Where were they living? Had they met? Were they married? How were they involved in the war? Now that they can reflect back, what do they think of the war?
- Why is the film called *War Stories Our Mothers Never Told Us*? Why do you think it was so difficult for the women in the film to talk about their experiences during the Second World War? Was it the same for men?

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