

Veterans moved by new WWII series by Ken Burns

by John Wilkens

Ken Burns was in a hurry. He couldn't stick around for the tears this time. But he promised to come back.

The famous documentary filmmaker was in San Diego recently, showing clips from his new epic, "The War," a 14-hour series about World War II, to about 150 people.

Burns has been doing this all over the country, a "payback" tour instead of a press tour. A grateful payback to the ever-dwindling number of veterans who fought in the war, and to those who sacrificed on the home front, he said.

KEN BURNS - Filmmaker Ken Burns speaks to San Diego veterans after a viewing of his new World War II series, 'The War.' CNS Photo by Scott Linnett. "We realized that we just owe it to these people," Burns said. "The old-fashioned media tour just seems kind of lame. I'd rather just share it with them."

The sharing gets emotional. Usually, Burns said, "a veteran will come up to me afterward, in tears, and say, 'I've waited all my life for someone to do it the way it was.'"

This day, though, he had to rush from the city's Veterans Museum and Memorial Center to another engagement. There wasn't time for any post-screening meet-and-greet.

But that doesn't mean there wasn't emotion. Some audience members wiped their eyes after viewing footage of dead Americans floating in the water at Tarawa, an atoll where Marines fought the Japanese in 1943.

They flinched at the sounds of exploding shells and the rat-a-tat-tat of machine gunfire. When a veteran from Minnesota explained on-screen that the war was horrible but "something that had to be done," they nodded.

"I'm glad the word is finally getting out about what the war was like," said Herman Herdt, a Navy veteran who flew on B-24s during the war. "People need to know."

World War II is hardly a secret, of course. It is in many ways our most celebrated war, the subject in recent years alone of best-selling books ("The Greatest Generation"), Oscar-winning movies ("Saving Private Ryan") and acclaimed television projects ("Band of Brothers").

In Burns' eyes, though, the war has been a little too celebrated.

"It has been so smothered in bloodless, gallant myth," Burns said in an interview before the screening. "It's become the good war, when of course the Second World War was the worst war. Sixty million human beings died.

"We need to refocus how we tell the story. Instead of being seduced by the presidents, the prime ministers, the field marshals and the famous generals, instead of getting seduced by everything Nazi, or by the strategy and the tactics, we need to focus on what it was like to be in the war."

His series, which will premiere on PBS in September, tells the story of the war from "the bottom up," through the eyes of 50 people from four American towns: Sacramento, Calif.; Waterbury, Conn.; Mobile, Ala.; and Luverne, Minn.

Those towns - one from the West, one from the Northeast, one from the South and one from the Midwest - stand in for places large and small all across the country, Burns said. "Every city in America was affected by the war."

After he made his Emmy-winning documentary about the Civil War in 1990, Burns was reluctant to do another combat film. He said he didn't want to be typecast. And he wasn't sure he could handle "being sucked again into the vortex of war."

But two things made him reconsider: the fact that about 1,000 World War II veterans are dying every day, and the fact that many American youngsters know almost nothing about the "great cataclysm" that upended the world from 1939 to 1945.

"Many of them think we fought with the Germans against the Russians," Burns said. "They don't know that we fought in Europe and the Pacific at the same time."

When Burns mentioned that youthful ignorance before Wednesday's screening, there was gasping and head-shaking in the audience - a mix of war veterans, their families and people who heard about it through the local PBS channel.

But the veterans know they share some of the blame. They have been notoriously reticent to discuss what happened with even their families.

"My dad talked about the war, but it was always just the funny stories," said Pat Anderson, a San Diego resident who attended the screening. "It was never the serious stuff." Herdt said he only recently started talking about the war, at the urging of his pastor.

After the screening, Burns thanked the veterans for their service, "for helping to save the world," for the example they set of what can happen when all of America rows in the same direction.

And Burns encouraged their grandchildren to do what he did: Grab a camera and ask those who were alive back then what it was really like.

"You'll find," he said, "that in extraordinary times there are no ordinary lives."

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