



Background information on Oh What a lovely War!

The stage musical “Oh What a Lovely War” was first seen by audiences in 1963. It was based on original satirical versions of popular songs from the Western Front but strung together with an extreme left wing narrative. This criticised the incompetence of generals and the self interest of the ruling class and capitalists in perpetuating the war. Officers were portrayed as blinkered and stupid and the heroes were working class soldiers. This kind of interpretation of the First World War became very popular in the 1960s at a time when opposition grew to the Vietnam War and the Cold War. 1960s radicalism became imposed on the narrative of the earlier conflict. “Oh What a Lovely War!” was widely seen in Britain and some historians have blamed it for creating stereotypes of the First World War that are often still repeated in popular culture. However while the 1968 film version remained anti-establishment the left-wing politics of the original musical were toned down. Indeed it is claimed that veterans of the First World War who wished to remind themselves of the camaraderie of the period went to see “ Oh What a Lovely War” in the 1960`s at the theatre to join in with the old war songs (they ignored the political message).

Resource C: bombed last night 1.16 minutes

The lyrics and tune of the song date from the First World War and both the uniforms and trench setting are accurate. However the scene itself is fictional as is the dance routine that accompanies the singing.

Resource F: church parade 1.33 minutes

The scene was filmed at a ruined abbey in Devon. The costumes and detail of the Church Parade service are accurate. The hymn “What a friend we have in Jesus” would have been sung in such a service though it is highly unlikely that soldiers would have dared to have sung the satirical version on this kind of occasion. This is being sung in the film to draw the dramatic contrast between the ceremony the soldiers are officially taking part in and their true feelings about the war which are expressed in the satirical version of the hymn.

Resource G: Playing leap frog

The uniforms and details of this military inspection are accurate. The words of the song are also an authentic expression from the time of feelings of frontline soldiers who sometimes viewed staff officers as being both remote and living in some style well behind the lines. The disrespectful tone of the Anzac soldiers singing the song was also common among troops from Australia and New Zealand. However it is very unlikely that troops would have sang this song at such a parade with staff officers actually present. The staff officers actually leaping over each other's backs is fictional and holds them up to ridicule.



Resource H: Closing sequence

In this powerful closing sequence of the film the soul of a dead British soldier joins others in an afterlife represented by beautiful sunlit hillside scattered with 16,000 white crosses which represent casualties. The scene is obviously fictional but the song is authentic.