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Opening extract from

Book of War Stories

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The world at war





THE FLIMSY BIPLANES, stubby tanks and cavalry officers on horseback of the First World War now seem part of a distant age, like Montgolfier's gaudy hot air balloons and the mighty wooden men o' war of Napoleonic times. But there are still a handful of men alive today who fought in that war. In fact, the last survivor of the 1914 Christmas truce (see p38-46) only died in 2005, a sprightly 109 year old, still willing

to reminisce for documentary film-makers about the events of that extraordinary day. Like many other veterans of both world wars, he found it difficult to talk about what had happened to him. Even 90 years on, the memory of the young men who died beside him in France and Belgium moved him to tears.

There are still millions of people alive who lived today through the Second World War. Many grandparents even remember it vividly. Its technology may seem quaint now, but that war introduced the world to computers, jet planes, penicillin, space rockets and nuclear weapons. The end of the war, with its fearful standoff between the western democracies and the Soviet Union, has shaped the history of the world to this day.

The casualties of the two wars are so immense (at least 76 million dead) it is easy to forget the individuals who were caught up in these conflicts. Most were former civilians – farm and factory hands, civil servants, teachers – plucked from their everyday lives and plunged into a terrifying and often lethal ordeal. The wars were on too great a scale to be fought merely by professional standing armies.

Even those that stayed at home were caught up in the Second World War, like no other conflict in history. It was not just the luckless populations of the battle zones, stranded in the scorched earth between advancing and retreating armies. The citizens of London and Hiroshima saw their cities devastated or destroyed by bombers which had flown hundreds or thousands of miles from enemy territory to attack them.

Many of the episodes in this book tell the stories of ordinary men and women – soldiers, sailors, aircrew – caught up in the tide of great battles or campaigns. Some of the stories are about spies – men and women of extraordinary courage who ventured into enemy territory in the certain knowledge that they would be killed if captured.

Even those who survived with no obvious physical or psychological damage were tormented by what they had seen and done. One British veteran of the First World War recalled:

"Us fellows, it took us years to get over it. Years! Long after when you were working, married, had kids, you'd be lying in bed with your wife and you'd see it all before you. Couldn't sleep. Couldn't lie still. Many's the time I've got up and tramped the streets till it came daylight… And many's the

time I've met other fellows that were out there doing exactly the same thing. Went on for years that did."

For those that fought in them, the two world wars remained the most intense and vivid experiences of their lives.