

ChamberFest Brown County and Brown County Playhouse

Present

Letters From The Front

adapted from letters by American Service Members and their loved ones throughout history

Ian Gindes, piano
David Govertsen, Bass-Baritone

Tyler Lee, tenor

Angela Born, Mezzo-soprano
Desiree Hassler, soprano

Music by Patrick Zimmerli

Libretto by Mirabelle Ordinaire

Narration Written by Jeffrey Ernstoff

Staged and Directed by George Cederquist

With guest narrator Todd Norris and special guest Charles Yeager

Letters From The Front

Act I

Overture

I'll Live For Your Letters
I Sat Myself Down This Moment
Preparation For Battle
A Minute Doesn't Go By
Vietnam War Song
Where Are You Tonight?
All Greasy And Salty
This Is A Most Horrible War
I Have a Rendezvous With Death

Intermission

Act II

I'll Live For Your Letters Reprise
Tonite Two Fellows Got Together
Poem For Irving F. Diamond
A Baby At Home
Now There Will Be Stories To Tell
Engagement Letter
It Won't Be Long Now
Finale

About The Artists

Ian Gindes | Pianist

Pianist Ian Gindes has performed as a solo artist around the US, including at Carnegie Hall in New York, the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, the Donald W. Nixon Centre for the Visual and Performing Arts, and as a featured artist with St. Louis Philharmonic. His 2023 recording, *Rachmanionoff* (Navona) was lauded by *The Whole Note* magazine (Canada) for his “illustrious renditions..” of “...Rachmaninoff masterworks.” *Gramophone* magazine (UK) praised his work on his previous release, *American Visions* (Centaur, 2016), for his “keyboard brilliance.” His music has been featured by SiriusXM Symphony Hall, WFMT Chicago, Jed Distler’s Between The Keys on WWFM, American Veterans Radio, and Radio Arts Foundation of St. Louis. He has been featured on CBS 2 Chicago and WGN-TV. Ian has served in the Illinois Army National Guard for over 21 years and currently holds the rank of Major, working as the Executive Officer of the 34th Division Support Troops Battalion. His military career includes serving as the HHD 65th Company Commander (2019-2021) managing personnel for relief efforts and civil unrest during the COVID pandemic, and serving as the Commander of the Illinois Army National Guard Band from 2017-2018. Ian holds a Doctor of Musical Arts in Piano Performance from the University of Illinois, where he studied under Leeds International Piano Competition winner Dr. Ian Hobson.

Tyler Lee | Tenor

Long Island-born tenor Tyler Lee is a fulltime chorister at the Lyric Opera of Chicago and the Grant Park Music Festival. He was the tenor soloist in *Voices of Light* by Richard Einhorn with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra under conductor Marin Alsop. He received his Bachelor of Music at Peabody Institute and received his Master of Music at NYU Steinhardt. At six years old, he wrote and voiced “Dexter and Computress Get Mandark,” the 50th episode of Cartoon Network’s “Dexter’s Laboratory.” In the years following, he was a series regular on Disney’s “Out of the Box”, and a guest on “The Tonight Show” with Jay Leno.

Angela Born | Mezzo-soprano

Earning critical acclaim for her “rich, clear voice” that is “geared towards storytelling” (*Chicagoland Musical Theatre*), Chicago-based mezzo-soprano Angela Born is a fach-defying opera theatre artist and interpreter of new classical works. Her many operatic roles include Marjorie in *Fizz and Ginger* (Whitney E. George), Lucinda in *Dark Sisters* (Nico Muhly), Patience in *Patience and Sarah* (Paula Kimper), the titular role in *Princess Ida*, and The Witch in *Hansel und Gretel*. She is also the recipient of multiple Chicago DCASE grants and is the 2023 songSLAM winner for her premiere performance of Michelle Isaac’s “What Every Woman Must Not Say.” Ms. Born has performed with many opera companies, including the Lyric Opera of the North, the Loveland Opera Theatre, the Gilbert and Sullivan Opera Company, the Ouroboros Opera Company, and the Chicago City Opera.

Desirée Hassler | Soprano

In addition to singing in the full-time chorus at Lyric Opera of Chicago, soprano Desirée Hassler has sung and covered roles at Lyric in *Four Portraits*, *Cendrillon*, *West Side Story*, *Tannhäuser*, *Oklahoma!*, *Manon*, *Macbeth*, *Boris Godunov*, *Show Boat*, *Elektra*, and *Der Rosenkavalier*. Alongside her Lyric Opera of Chicago colleagues, Hassler won her first Emmy in 2022 for Outstanding Achievement for Arts/Entertainment—Long Form Content for *Pagliacci*. She enjoys performing music from the Renaissance to the 21st century— in recital, concert, opera, and performance art mediums. Desirée has successfully competed from regional to international levels at the Bel Canto Competition, the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, and the International Franz Liszt Competition. She graduated in 2011 with a doctorate in Vocal Performance and Literature from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

David Govertsen | Bass-baritone

Chicago native bass-baritone David Govertsen has been active as a professional singer for nearly twenty years, portraying a wide variety of opera's low-voiced heroes, villains, and comic characters. Mr. Govertsen has appeared as a soloist with numerous local and regional opera companies, including Lyric Opera of Chicago, Santa Fe Opera, Tulsa Opera, Chicago Opera Theater, and the Haymarket Opera Company. He is a member of the vocal chamber quartet Fourth Coast Ensemble and has performed with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Ricardo Muti. He has also performed with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, the Madison Symphony Orchestra, the Rochester Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Grant Park Orchestra. He is an alumnus of the Ryan Opera Center as well as the Santa Fe Opera and Central City Opera apprentice programs and holds degrees from Northwestern University, Northern Illinois University, and the College of DuPage.

George Cederquist | Director

Award-winning director George Cederquist is the Producing Artistic Director of the Chicago Fringe Opera and is both the Artistic Director of Opera and Theatre Department Chair at North Park University. His digital opera short 'Telekinetik' for Catapult Opera was later screened at the 2025 Prototype Festival, and called "a place where David Lynch would have felt right at home" by the *New York Times*. He has directed new productions and opera scenes with Opera Festival of Chicago, Chicago Dramatists, the Chicago Sinfonietta, Pittsburgh Opera, the Bay View Music Festival, Chicago Folks Operetta, Wolf Trap Opera, and Chautauqua Opera. In addition to receiving a National Opera Association award, two American Prizes in Directing and Opera America's 2013 Director-Designer competition award, he has been awarded a Best Music Video Award at the Aladerrri International Film Festival. He is the executive producer of 'Opera Box Score', America's Talk Radio Show About Opera, heard on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and WNUR 89.3 FM Chicago.

Patrick Zimmerli | Composer

Patrick Zimmerli is a New York- and Paris-based composer, producer, and saxophonist. His full-length opera, *Lucia Joyce*, premiered in Dublin, Ireland, in April 2026. Zimmerli was recently awarded a Copland Fund grant to support the 2025 release of his new album *Messages*. He has created a new label, Emergence Music Productions (EMP), whose first release in May 2025 was Zimmerli's *Songs of Innocence*, featuring Kevin Hays and Satoshi Takeishi. A Columbia University graduate and winner of the Thelonious Monk Composers Competition, he also premiered his *Alan Seeger: Instrument of Destiny*, a 90-minute Oratorio based on Seeger's works and letters during World War I, at the Cathedrale des Invalides in Paris in 2017.

Mirabelle Ordinaire | Librettist

Mirabelle Ordinaire is a French director, librettist and translator based in Paris and New York. She joined the Metropolitan Opera Stage Directors in 2018, and is thrilled to have been the revival director of Zeffirelli's iconic *Boheme* production there for the past three seasons. Productions she has created this season include *Les Pêcheurs de Perles* at the Opéra de Dijon and *Don Pasquale* at the Opéra Royal de Wallonie in Liège, Belgium. She also conceived, wrote and staged the oratorio *Alan Seeger: Instrument of Destiny* by Patrick Zimmerli (Invalides, Paris, 2017; Cathedral St. John the Divine, NYC, 2019), in addition to the acclaimed *Kurt Weill Story* (Académie de l'Opéra de Paris, 2018). Mirabelle Ordinaire earned her PhD. In Theatre at Columbia University in 2011 and is also the artistic director of the Compagnie Extra.

Jeffery Ernstoff | Narration Writer

Formerly the Special Events Creative Director for Radio City Music Hall Productions in New York, Jeffery Ernstoff has written and developed productions and special events for live theater and television. He is the recipient of National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships in Music, Musical Theater and The Chairman's Task Force on Arts Education. He serves as Creative Director for The World Innovation Network (TWIN), formerly KIN at Northwestern University, and has consulted on, written for, and produced many events through his company, Ernstoff Creative, since 2004.

About The Writers

The American Revolution

James Davenport enlisted in the Massachusetts militia in 1776 and joined the Continental Army in 1777. He served throughout the American Revolution through 1783. His letters to his brother describe the conditions under which he and others with him marched and encountered British forces as well as descriptions of the Continental Army's encampments. Today, Davenport's letters are an important primary source for what life was like for everyday enlisted Soldiers and Non-Commissioned Officers during the Revolutionary War.

The piece "I Set Myself Down This Moment" is taken from his letter from October of 1782 and includes a dialogue with his pen in the style of an object narrative, which was a popular literary form of the time. The song, "Preparation for Battle," is excerpted from his letter from August of 1780 when he was encamped at Hackensack near New York, where the Continental Army frequently encountered and fought British troops.

The Civil War

CPT. Jacob Ritner and his wife **Emeline** corresponded throughout his service in the Union Army during the Civil War. Their letters are published in *Love and Valor*, a book curated by their great-great grandson, Charles Larimer. Three songs in the album, "Where Are You Tonight?", "All Greasy and Salty," and "This is a Most Horrible War," are based on excerpts of their long correspondence, which documents everyday life in the 1860s during the war from the perspective of both the war front and the home front. Ritner served with the 1st Iowa Volunteers and later the 25th Iowa Volunteers. His service began when President Lincoln first called for volunteers to serve until the war ended in 1865. After the war, CPT Ritner returned home to his wife, his family, and his farm in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa.

World War I

American poet and New York native **Alan Seeger** moved to Paris to support his fledgling literary career. He served in World War I in the French Legion, enlisting in 1914 to support his adopted country. Many of Seeger's works and letters were published posthumously after his death in 1916 during the Battle of the Somme at Belloy-en-Santerre. Seeger's likeness was later used as the basis for the memorial to the American Volunteers for the French Legion at the Place des États-Unis in Paris. The piece "Rendezvous With Death" is based on one of his poems.

World War II

Joseph Denov served in Europe during World War II and wrote the letter included in the song "Two Fellows Got Together Tonite," describing both a waltz being played during down time while he was in camp and a memory of dancing to his wife, Tess.

Dr. George Freedman was a dentist. He spent most of his professional career as a member of the military and served during World War II and the Korean War. After years of serving on military bases, Dr. Freedman practiced dentistry until his retirement. He and his wife, Mary, resided in Georgia. His letter, written during his service in World War II, was to his brother, Maurice, and is shared here in "Now There Will be Stories to Tell."

Herman Gresik graduated from dental school in 1942 and enlisted in the Army. He married Jean Bemis on June 5, 1943, and was based in Chickasha, OK until he was shipped out to

southeastern England in January 1944. He was killed during a bombing raid on July 3, 1944 after writing a letter to his wife upon learning the news that his daughter, Mary Victoria, had been born, expressed here in the song "A Baby at Home." Mary Victoria grew up to attend Loyola University in Chicago for medical school, as her father had done before her for dental school. The song based on his letter honors his family and his memory. He is buried at the American Military Cemetery in Cambridge, England, UK.

Howard T. Harwood of Skokie, IL, served in Italy during World War II in the Army Signal Corps. His friend, Irving F. Diamond died during combat on the Anzio Beachhead in Italy in January 1944. Irving is buried there. Howard sent home in a letter a poem dedicated to the memory of his friend whose death he witnessed, expressed here in the piece "Poem for Irving F. Diamond." In 2012, Mr. Harwood was honored by the Illinois Holocaust Museum in Skokie as part of an exhibit featuring local veterans.

Irving Koidin served for 3.5 years as an Army medic and Private in the Pacific Theater during WWII. He was mainly stationed in New Guinea. He met his future wife, Bea, at a high school dance in Chicago, but shortly after their meeting, he received his draft notice. They courted through daily letters throughout his deployment and, in the one included here in the song "Engagement Letter," Irving proposes. They were married within days of his return home to Chicago. With no time to send invitations, they invited their guests via pay phones using rolls of dimes.

Hattie Reinauer wrote to her son, Richard Reinauer, who served in the Pacific in World War II. She sent her letter to him when he had enlisted and was getting ready to be sent overseas. The songs "I'll Live for Your Letters," and "I'll Live For Your Letters Reprise," share her support for her son's service and hope for his safe return home. Richard carried the letter with him throughout his service during the war as a reminder of home. During the war, he served as a dog trainer with the US Marine Corps War Dog unit, and he was one of the first US troops to enter Nagasaki after the atomic bomb was dropped. When he returned home, he combined his love for animals with a career in media, becoming one of the producers of the original series of "Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom," which brought science, wildlife conservation, and the beauty of nature to several generations. "Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom" returned to television with a brand-new series, "Protecting the Wild," in 2023 and continues today.

Helen Strzelczyk served as a nurse in the Pacific in World War II, and was writing to her brother who was also serving as the war was ending. Her letter, captured in the song "It Won't Be Long Now," describes her voyage home from her service and the experience of returning to the US sailing under the Golden Gate Bridge after receiving the news of victory.

Vietnam War

Fred Leo Brown served in the Vietnam War, enlisting in 1967. He wrote home to his parents, especially to his mother, Belva, every day, frequently writing by moonlight while on fire guard. SGT. Brown served several tours of duty and spent over 300 days in the field in combat. After his service, Fred shared his experience by self-publishing his letters and became a Chicago-area veterans' advocate and Vietnam War educator. Mr. Brown, now retired, lives with his wife Barbara in Indiana. He is the only living veteran whose words are included in our music. "Vietnam War Song" recalls his experience in combat.

The Gulf War

Col. Bill Logel served in Iraq in the Gulf War and was the Chief of Personnel for the 416th Engineer Command of the US Army Reserve in Chicago. Bill wrote his letter to his grandson, Jason, whom he and his wife raised. Inspired by his grandfather's example, Jason is now a former US Marine who served in Afghanistan. The song, "A Minute Doesn't Go By," honors their service and the next generation of service members and veterans.

Program Notes

By John von Rhein

The history of the grand American experiment in democracy lives, in many ways, in the letters and stories of the service members who put their lives on the line—and, in some cases, paid the ultimate price—for their country.

Their courage, dedication and patriotism take on even greater significance in 2026 as the nation celebrates the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Whether they are late-18th-century colonials who took up arms against the most powerful world empire of their day; members of the U.S. military engaged in far-flung conflicts across today's globe; or family members who wait for the safe return of their loved ones, their stories tell us who we are and who we hope to be, as Americans.

Their words are the beating heart of *Letters From The Front*.

The vocal chamber work, written in 2025, was commissioned by Ian Gindes, the award-winning pianist, producer and longtime member of the Army National Guard, in which he currently holds the rank of Major. It comprises a prelude for piano alone, a dozen songs for individual voices (soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor, and bass-baritone), two duets and three vocal ensembles. *Letters From The Front* is at once an extended song cycle and a grand musical tapestry of American history, hope, faith, aspiration, despair and optimism in times of war. The libretto, by French stage director and librettist Mirabelle Ordinaire, draws on the experiences of service members as expressed in their correspondence. Texts span virtually the entire history of this nation—from the American Revolution and Civil War, through the Second World War, to Vietnam and the Gulf War.

The music, by New York- and Paris-based composer, producer and saxophonist Patrick Zimmerli, turns their experiences into aural poetry. With piano accompaniments that abound in period atmosphere, the score sounds American through and through. Even as it draws on various classical and popular musical idioms, the lyrical impetus is very much Zimmerli's own. We are reminded throughout this ambitious and important new American song cycle that the price of freedom is paid, to this day, in dedication, self-sacrifice and blood, by ordinary citizens called on to defend a government of the people, by the people and for the people. *Letters From The Front* stands as a tribute to our service members and veterans, along with those who lost their lives in the birth and growth of the Republic.

John von Rhein was the classical music critic of the Chicago Tribune for more than 40 years until his retirement from the newspaper in 2018. He continues to write articles on musical subjects for such print and online publications as Chicago Classical Review, Opera magazine and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chicago Lyric Opera program books. He is co-author (with Andrew Porter) of Bravi, a photo history of the

Ardis Krainik years at Lyric Opera of Chicago (Abbeville Press). He holds an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree from DePaul University. He lives in Chicago.

Libretto

Letters From The Front 1776—2026

Act I

1. Overture

2. I'll Live For Your Letters

Based on Hattie Reinauer's letter to her son, Richard, as he was preparing to serve in World War II

There never will be a day or night
that my thoughts, my hopes, my prayers
will not be with you.

If you're lonely
embrace me in your thoughts—
for I'll always be there.

I'll live for your letters.
I'll live for your letters,
your letters.

No detail will be too small.
It will help me be close to your life.

Remember,
nothing is ever too much
for your mother who loves you.

3. I Set Myself Down This Moment

Based on a letter from James Davenport to his brother during the American Revolution

Dear Brother,

I sat myself down this moment to write to you,
but my pen was not willing to write!

It told me it was very sorry—
I would use it for nothing
when I had used it up to the stump

a-writing letters to people
and they made no return.

They made no return.

I told it I would write this once
as perhaps you had no opportunity,
and if you had,
I would do according to the old saying,
“Do as you would be done by,
not as you are done by.”

I have no news to write to you,
only there is a talk
of the war being almost all over;
I think they must mean all over the world.

I am something in haste, so I conclude.

I am, dear brother, with sentiments and esteem,

Your loving brother

4. Preparation For Battle

James Davenport writing to his brother during the American Revolution

We expect ev’ry day to meet our enemy.
Great preparations are making for an attack.

We marched
and it was so extreme hot
that a great many of our men
dropped down in the road.

We had been without any sort of meat
for four days.

The cannon keep firing now down below.

5. A Minute Doesn't Go By

Based on a letter by Colonel Bill Logel to his grandson during the Gulf War

A minute doesn't go by when I don't think of you.
A day doesn't go by
when I don't wish we were walking together.

Some day when you grow older
you will understand
what it means to be an American.

Hopefully you won't have to defend your country,
but if you do,
your country is worth defending.

And I look into the eyes
of all the American Soldiers
knowing that some of them will die here
for their country
and I know
that if my work
can keep one, even just one, alive,
then it is worth my sacrifice to be here.

I wish I was there with you.

Love,

Poppie

6. Vietnam War Song

Based on a letter from Vietnam War veteran Fred Leo Brown to his mother

Dear Ma:

The men say
you just scare the people at home
when you tell them everything.

You sounded like
you would rather have it said than hid.

I feel better when I do,
but what I about to say,
when it happened,
and how, was ghastly!

An artillery round blew.
Cabal! The whole mountain shook.
Mortars!
Medic! Medic!
I can't breathe.
Someone, please help me, help me!
I can't give him respiration—
Help!

On the Chopper
Two men laying there dead.
On the Chopper
Two other men hurt—
Bad enough they would never return.

On the Chopper
He died
and he died.
He died.

Everyone shielded me from the blast.
That is why I am here to write these words.

Well, that's all in the past.
I am facing today and tomorrow now.

I am 19 and one of the oldest men here.
Most of them have been killed or wounded.
Now I know sorrow.

Fred

7. Where Are You Tonight?

Based on the letters of CPT Jacob Ritner and his wife, Emeline, during the Civil War

Soprano

Where are you tonight,
and what are you doing?
Oh I would so like to know.

I have got the blues
most horribly tonight
and the wind is blowing
a perfect streak.

Oh how gloomy
everything seems tonight!

How I wish you were with us
to chase away the melancholies,
but where are you tonight,
and what are you doing...

Tenor

I often lie awake at night
looking at the moon and stars
and thinking that they are the same moon and stars
that shine on you.

And then I think
that maybe you are sitting
in the door at the same time
and looking at the same objects,
or perhaps the same stars I am looking at,
and then I feel very near you.

And then I think again
that we have the same kind Providence
to watch over and protect us both,
and the same Heavenly Father
to call upon for help in time of need.

I feel grateful
that I have a dear wife
and kind friends at home
who remember me in their prayers.

8. All Greasy And Salty

Based on a letter from Emeline Ritner during the Civil War

Dear Jake,

I received a letter from you today,
and it found me with my hands
all greasy and salty
for I had just finished
salting away the meat.

All greasy and salty, for
I had just finished salting away the meat.

We got the pig killed yesterday
And they brought it home
So we cut it up ourselves.

Don't you laugh!

We done it up just right.
There was not a man we could get;
we just had to do it.

All greasy and salty, for
I had just finished salting away the meat.

And I wish you were here to help eat it.

9. This Is A Most Horrible War

Based on the letters of CPT Jacob Ritner and his wife, Emeline, during the Civil War

Tenor

My Dear Wife:

This is a most horrible war.

Is it not, dear,
to take me away from you
for so long a time?

But you must not think
I regret that I entered the army.

I must count my past suffering
and shattered health
as only the small dust
compared with the priceless blessings
of peace, freedom, and national unity.

Only to have contributed something, however little,
for the peace,
for the glory,
will be a joy through life
and a consolation in death.

Soprano

Where are you tonight and what are you doing?
Where are you tonight and what are you doing?
Have you contributed something, however little,
for the peace,
for the glory?

Where
to have contributed something, however little,
for the peace, for the glory,
for the peace, for the glory.

10. I Have A Rendezvous With Death

Based on "I Have a Rendezvous with Death" by American World War I Soldier and poet Alan Seeger

A rendezvous, a rendezvous,
A rendezvous, a rendezvous

I have a rendezvous with Death
At some disputed barricade,
When Spring comes back with rustling shade
And apple-blossoms fill the air—
I have a rendezvous with Death
When Spring brings back blue days and fair.

I have a rendezvous with Death
That he shall take me
A rendezvous with Death
That he shall lead me
That he shall lead me

It may be he shall take my hand
And lead me into his dark land
And close my eyes and quench my breath —
It may be I shall pass him still.

I have a rendezvous with Death
On some scarred slope of battered hill,
When Spring comes round again this year
And the first meadow-flowers appear.

I have a rendezvous with Death
I have a rendezvous with Death
God knows
God knows

God knows 'twere better to be deep
Pillowed in silk and scented down,
Where love throbs out in blissful sleep,
Pulse nigh to pulse, and breath to breath,
Where hushed awakenings are dear...

But I have a rendezvous with Death
At midnight in some flaming town,
When Spring trips north again this year,

And I to my pledged word am true,
I shall not fail that rendezvous.

I shall not fail that rendezvous with Death.
I have a rendezvous with Death.

Act II

1. I'll Live For Your Letters Reprise

Based on Hattie Reinauer's letter to her son, Richard, during World War II

There never, never, never will be a day or night
that my thoughts, my hopes,
my thoughts, my hopes,
my prayers will not be with you.

If you're lonely
embrace me in your thoughts—
for I'll always be there.

Wear your uniform proudly,
and your country
will honor you.

I'll live for your letters.
I'll live for your letters,
your letters.

No detail, no detail will be too small.
It will help me be close to your life.

Remember,
nothing is ever too much
for your mother who loves you.

2. Tonite Two Fellows Got Together

Based on a letter from Joe Denov to his wife, Tess, during World War II

Tonite two fellows got together
to play waltzes on a violin
and an accordion.

It brought back memories
of the most pleasant moments
that we have spent together.

Waltzing together
around the dance floor,
oblivious to everyone else
giving ourselves freely to the pleasure of the dance.

The ache of missing you was so great,
and I felt so alone
and lost,
I nearly broke down and cried.

Luckily, I have this paper,
and in writing this
lost some of that alone feeling.

3. Poem For Irving F. Diamond

Based on a World War II letter from Howard Harwood honoring the memory of his friend, Irving F. Diamond

Although we never saw
The bright-eyed look
Nor felt the hand-clasp firm,
God made it so
In His own way
That we should meet at Anzio today.

The quiet of the night
Was shattered by
The man-made light
Of death;
And your bright eyes were dulled,

And ended was your breath.

The guns thundered bravely
And rising tracers red
Met the challenge gravely
While hearts ashore were bled.

I didn't know then,
Fraternal friend,
How near you were.
And yet the bomb that hit the ship
And flamed the sky
Caused an inner, anguished sigh.

'Twas later, Irv,
When I first heard
The sad black news;
A dear, old pal
Was close to you.

And what I saw
Was your last view
Gone before dawn
Could welcome you;

But this I know,
By sun and star
And earthly sod,
That where you are—
There is God.

4. A Baby At Home

Based on a letter from Herman Gresik to his wife during World War II

I got the cablegram late last night.
Write and tell me what she looks like.
How much does she weigh?
What color hair and eyes?
Does she look like you?
I hope so.

How do you feel?
Let me know everything that happens.
I can't believe I have a baby back home.
Tell the little shrimp hello from me.

I think I will have to become
a serious old married man
and not go out with the boys
and raise hell all the time
and save my money
for wife and baby back home.

Don't forget that I am over here,
and now that you have
a baby to love,
don't give her all your love
but save a little for me
when I get home.

5. Now There Will Be Stories To Tell

***Based on a letter from George Freedman to his brother, Maurice,
sent during World War II***

Now there will be stories to tell.
Stories of bombing, shelling, snipers;
Stories of being under fire
from 4:30 in the morning
until 2 in the afternoon
and counting the 4100 dead around.

Stories of working days and nights
until your head swims
and your feet give out.

Chased around at sea,
chased around on land,
moving up,
moving back,
moving up,
stench, stink, smell,
flies, mosquitoes, brambles, ruins,
the living, the wounded, the dead —
makes me feel like an old man.

Yes, now there will be stories to tell.

6. Engagement Letter

Based on a letter from Irving Koidin, written from Australia, during World War II

Bass-baritone

Okay, I'm a meanie.
There shouldn't be any excuse whatsoever
making my sugar
wait for her "sugar report."

However— I've been busy
but you will forgive me—
wait and see, but keep on reading.

I guess my face is red
because I don't know how to start this paragraph.
But Cupid insists on prompting me;
I can be quite stubborn, you know.
Well—well, I got to get this over with!

Well, honey,
as I'm terribly much in love with you,
I've decided
to cut out the "preliminaries"
and be engaged to you.

I want and need you
more than anything in the world, darling.
I want and need you
more than anything in the world.

They say it takes an engagement ring
to be engaged.
As I can't get it here,
hard as I try,
I'm writing home to ask Etta,
And Syl, if she so desires,
to go with you
and help you select it.

Please let the engagement ring
symbolize my love for you.

“If I come home.”

And then,
let's pray that the time will come again
when we can make another trip
to the “ol’” park bench
and I can ask you to be
Misses Irv Koidin.
(Even looks good on paper, doesn't it?)

There is a story “behind the scenes”
of our engagement, darling.
It was at the battle in New Guinea
that it was decided.

It was in those half-flooded,
stinking,
muddy foxholes and slit trenches
where danger was always prominent
that I knew our love was real.

Somehow, darling,
I was able to see your face before me
and the earth didn't shield its brightness.
Somehow it seemed that God was bringing me your
messages and the messages seemed to read:

Soprano

“Please God, Please God direct his actions
so as to spare him for me—
and—
Please God, I love him and need him—
Protect him.”

Soprano, Mezzo-soprano, and Tenor chorus

“Please God, Please God, direct his actions
so as to spare him for me —
Please God,
I love him and need him—
Protect him.”

Bass-baritone

I knew that you were praying for me darling,
And I did too, every night, and our prayers
worked miracles.

I was inspired,
fought harder to live
if not for myself but for you.

If prayers helped when I was in trouble, honey,
there is no unearthly reason
why we shouldn't pray
just the same
when I'm safe.
Besides, the war isn't over yet.
Let's hope God brings victory to the free world soon.

7. It Won't Be Long Now

Based on a letter by Helen Strzelczyk as she returned home from her service as a nurse in the Pacific during World War II

It won't be long now
and I'll be seeing the old country.
Just thinking about it
stir up the butterflies,
and the days just can't go fast enough.

Honestly, I just can't believe it —
I'm in the good ol' USA again.
Everything looks so good.

The lights,
the homes,
the skyscrapers,
left me speechless.
It is still hard to believe.

Even writing now
I feel a lump in my throat
and my eyes keep filling.
My eyes keep filling.
There is no place like it.

Until we meet again,
I always remain,

Helen

8. Finale

Bass-baritone

Now there will be stories to tell.
There will be stories to tell.

Soprano

Where are you tonight, and what are you doing?
Oh I would so like to know.

Tenor

Luckily, I have this paper,
and in writing this
lost some of that alone feeling.

I often think that maybe you are sitting in the door
at the same time
and looking at the same objects or perhaps the same stars
I am looking at.

Mezzo-soprano

There never will be a day or night
that my thoughts, my hopes, my prayers
will not be with you.

There will be stories.
I would so like to know.

All

I'm in the good ol' USA again.

Soprano

Greetings to all of you, direct from the States.

All

There is no place like it. The good ol' USA.

About The Artwork

The collage artwork and design showcased in our slide show was created by Dan Kwarcinski. It includes portraits of the following letter writers:

CPT Jacob and Emeline Ritner, courtesy of Charles Larimer

Fred Leo Brown, courtesy of Barbara Brown

Alan Seeger (wikimedia commons, creative commons licensing/public domain).

The artwork also includes a photo of the grandfather of pianist Ian Gindes, who served in Europe during World War II, as well as a photo of his wife's grandfather, who served during World War II in the Pacific.

To find out more about what we have created, please check out our website, www.lettersfromthefront.net.

Acknowledgments

Our team would like to thank everyone who made this music possible, especially the following people and organizations who were instrumental in providing assistance with research and in sharing the letters for this project:

Joyce Logel
Charles Larimer
Julie Koidin
Fred Leo Brown
Barbara Brown
Noah Ginex
Anne Hayden
Dr. Mary Victoria Gresik

Judi Freedman
Sylvia Dickerson
Lisa B. Harwood
Josh Mitzen
Philip Degginger
Pritzker Military Museum and Library
Museum of the American Revolution
Illinois Holocaust Museum

We are grateful for our contributors, especially Charles Larimer, as well as for the encouragement, advice, and assistance of Frank Horger, Matt Peckham, Graham Duncan, T.J. and Louise Kuhny, and Thomas and Darcy Zoells.

We are most grateful for the sacrifice of American military families, service members, and veterans, whose stories we share through this music, as well as for all who preserve history and tell veterans' stories so that they are never forgotten. We salute you.

