

Öpera | Sunderland



THE SOLDIER'S RETURN

Libretto by
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MAN

And my wife will always say –

WOMAN

Where you at now?

MAN

And I say, ‘Why?’ And she’ll say –

WOMAN

Why, you may as well not be here
because your mind’s not here.

MAN

Because we’re on the grey line
between the Turks and the Greeks
we have the radios
on top of all the mountains.

But on a Sunday
you can get Two-Way
Family Favourites!

And all the blokes listen.

You have to do
your radio check
on the hour and that way
they know you’re safe
up your mountain
and everybody goes:

‘Two-Way Family Favourites!’

You listen, then 3 o’clock
comes round

—God, radio check!
So you have to find
the frequency
then talk back to the Army
—all’s well—put it down
then find Two-Way Family Favourites again.

Cyprus

My mother has the little radio on
in the kitchen at home
and I go away but always
remember back in the kitchen
at home on a Sunday dinner.

So you've been away from your wife
and family for nine month anyway,
and you come back and believe it or not
once you've said hello to the wife and children
you want to go and meet the lads down the pub.

And the wives will always say -

WOMAN

You've been with them for the last nine months,
why do you want to go and drink with them?

MAN

And you just haven't got it out your mind,
and then you find out you're sitting at home
and you're there but you're not there.

Northern Ireland Out the jungle, straight to Belfast.
And The Archies were on the radio
all the time, and out of 1969
all you remember is The Archies singing this song.

We all had these little pocket radios
and them Commando comics about half the size
of that, you know.

You had one of them
in your combat jacket pocket,
because you could travel miles and miles
in the back of a Bedford and you would never
know where you were.
Well, you could see out the back of a wagon
trundling through Germany and Belgium
or in the jungle in Malaya. You never knew where
you were.

Radios, they were no bigger than that.

VOICE 1

Did you fight for king and country?

VOICE 2

I bloody didn't.

I was fighting for my life and for my mates.

VOICE 1

Well, I remember being in my foxhole and I cried.

When I was going to go into action, I cried.

But I got out of that foxhole

and I went with the rest of them.

MAN

If you've never done it

you can't imagine it.

Or I suppose

you can imagine it

but it'll be the wrong things –

World War II

like Harry having been

a prisoner of war by the Italians and the Germans

—and his mam and dad—

because they were from a well-to-do family—

VOICE 2

So they were well-to-do—

MAN

—met him at Newcastle Station

when he finally got home

and they took him to a little café

for tea and cakes

and Harry! Harry was licking his way

—and picking up all the crumbs off the table and eating them.

Then when he drank his tea

he ate the tealeaves too!

WOMAN

Your sleep pattern's ruined
because of Ireland, because
it used to be four on, four off,
or four on and two off,
and now you can't sleep
past three to four hours,
because you think you've got to keep
getting up to go on patrol.

MAN

The memories flood in.
Can't sleep. Get up and go
to your pals because you know
your pals understand.

WOMAN

The drinking thing.
Long silences.

MAN

Silences deep and long.

WOMAN

You can't get anything
out of him of the war
other than when he's drunk.

MAN

Well, the jungle once it gets past 5 o'clock
at night it's black, and when it's black
it's black. And we don't move at night
—well, we're trying not to move.

VOICE 2

We all had creams.

VOICE 1

Yeah.
Like it would fall off you.

VOICE 2

Just drop off you.

Malaya

VOICE 1

A couple of weeks of that, and you sweat,

MAN

I mean, everything just used to drop off.
The epaulettes would drop off you,
the tops of your shirts would drop off,
your boots would definitely drop to bits.

BOTH VOICE 1 and 2

You have to smell like the jungle
to survive in the jungle.

MAN

What's happening at home—will they think I'm
dead?

WOMAN

Lashing out in bed
or rolling off the bed.
Can't get in the bed,
because he's not used to it,
so he sleeps on the floor
till he can get himself back in again.

MAN

And we arrive in the very early morning.

The next morning we get orders to retire
to the bottom of the ridge and wait.

The whole division's employed
taking the guns apart
and putting them back together again.

Nobody can sleep.

The colonel tells me he's taking the battalion
back to the hospital we'd billeted in the night before last.

We don't know where division is.
We don't know where brigade is.
We don't know where the battalion is.

World War II

We march from the camp
and take up a position on a railway line
overlooking a river.

We arrive at the hospital
to find no sign at all.

We then receive orders
to retire to the fish quay.

And we're marched back
through the town to the fish quay.

Nobody can sleep.

I find a brigadier and I tell him
who I am and what I am
and he tells me to bring my men
across the bridge as quickly as I can
as the bridge is going to be blown up.

We're bombed on the way, but no casualties.

I find a hospital train that's been bombed.

Nobody can sleep.

VOICE 1

But he became commander
in the middle of a battle
when his commander
was killed. And I said to him:
'What happened when they all came out —
when what was left came out?'

VOICE 2

All they wanted to do was sleep.
You can't put them under drills,
we've got to let them rest.
All they want to do is sleep.

MAN

I never thought of praying to God
until they started shelling me

and you don't go singing as you're being
blasted out of the earth

but the men sing 'Abide With Me'
every night at 6 o'clock.

WOMAN

You're home –

MAN

And the little radio's on
in the kitchen.

Back in the kitchen
at home on a Sunday dinner.