

Five Came Back: when Hollywood went to war

SHAER REAZ

When browsing through the catalogue of shows on Netflix one night, I came across an entry with a thumbnail that took me back to the book covers of classic thriller novels such as Alastair McLean's *Guns of Navarone*. The title was intriguing, as was the trailer—*Five Came Back* takes a look at five Oscar-winning directors and their work during World War II, with narration from Meryl Streep and analysis by Steven Spielberg, Francis Ford Coppola, Guillermo Del Toro, Paul Greengrass and Lawrence Kasdan.

The five directors whose work is put under the microscope—Frank Capra (of *It's a Wonderful Life* fame), William Wyler (*Wuthering Heights*, *Roman Holiday* and *Ben Hur*), John Ford (*Grapes of Wrath*, *Rio Grande*), John Huston (*The Maltese Falcon*, *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*) and George Stevens (*The Diary of Anne Frank*) all have similar beginnings of fame and adulation, but diverge in their paths while covering the war.

The story starts with the tension surrounding America's involvement in the war in Europe. Cut off from the conflict, pre-war America is at odds with its present-day politics and is shown as hesitant to engage in the fight. The government employed Hollywood's best and brightest to produce ten-minute shorts on the conflict raging in Europe, played before film screenings in theaters. They would go on to be full-length documentaries, the first of their kind.

By then, the American movie industry was worth millions, and would eventually offer up the services of Frank Capra—an Italian immigrant filled with existentialist questions and the desire to prove himself. Tasked by the War Department to make the shorts at a time when America was not at war and with no way of gathering footage, Capra used Nazi propaganda



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footage to show Americans the grand posturing of the Nazi rank and file, not to mention Hitler's hate-filled speeches. In his work, he would often introduce the enemy to moviegoers, including the ironically racist and counterintuitive Japanese in *Know Your Enemy - Japan* (1945), which would play a role in the internment of Japanese immigrants on America's West Coast.

John Ford, hot on the trails of the five Oscar wins for *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), would go on to serve as the head of Field Photo, a special unit comprising cameramen and directors that captured invaluable footage of the war for the

US Navy. His coverage of the war in the Pacific in *The Battle of Midway* (1942) would be considered a turning point for war documentaries, with the natural camera shake and in the zone filming winning critical acclaim for relaying the tension of battle to audiences that had never been in war. By landing on the beaches during D-day, John Ford took footage of extraordinary violence, the likes of which were suppressed by the War Department as they were convinced it would create an anti-war sentiment back home.

William Wyler, a director of Jewish descent from Mulhouse, France, would tour with the crew of a B17 bomber, the

Memphis Belle, and would capture reel after reel of film showing the horrors of death from the air. But his biggest contributions would never see the light of day carrying his own credit: the depiction of African American soldiers in a segregated America, their treatment at the hands of white servicemen, the routine racism from commanding officers, as well as the threat of the KKK. In the end, Wyler's films would be constrained by the War Department itself, which would give guidelines for "how to depict the Negro soldier".

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