

“Five Came Back”

This three-part series traces the careers of five of Hollywood’s leading directors who volunteered to serve in World War II: John Ford; John Huston; Frank Capra; George Stevens; and William Wyler. Among the films they shot were “The Battle of Midway”, “Memphis Belle”, “The Battle of San Pietro” and “Let There Be Light”. They brought their own special cinematic talents to chronicle the grim realities of warfare.

Frank Capra was charged with making a series of films to be shown on the home front called “Why We Fight”. He had virtually no money or staff but watching “Triumph of the Will”, Leni Riefenstahl’s masterful propaganda film glorifying Adolph Hitler, he had a brainstorm. He would film on the cheap by taking excerpts from her film, along with shots of Mussolini’s strutting before adoring crowds and add stock footage and narration. The resulting film would hopefully make it clear to the American public (many of whom had no desire to get caught up in a war in Europe) why Hitler and Mussolini had to be defeated. However, his later film, designed to focus American wrath on the Japanese, was so perniciously racist that General MacArthur refused to have it shown to his troops.

John Ford filmed “The Battle of Midway” but before the film could be shown in theaters he had to get the approval of the military. Since he knew the film would also be screened for FDR he spliced in a scene at the last minute to insure that presidential approval would be forthcoming,

Wyler made his mark with “Memphis Belle” which followed the crew of a B-17 on a perilous bombing mission over Germany. The thunderous noise inside the plane caused a loss of hearing from which he never fully recovered. George Stevens was with the U.S. Army from D-Day through the end of the war. His scenes of the liberation of Nazi death camps exposed the existential evil at the heart of Hitler’s empire and left him a changed man.

John Huston showed up with his film crew after US troops had taken the hilltop town of San Pietro. Being late to the fight didn’t faze Huston, who used troops to recreate the battle which he interspersed with actual combat footage. When he showed it to the military brass, however, they thought it was too grimly realistic to be shown to the troops. But General George Marshall gave it his stamp of

approval, stating that soldiers should know what they were going up against. But Huston was not so lucky with “Let There Be Light”, which showed soldiers being treated for what we now call PTSD. The Army only wanted to show the heroic face of war and as a result the film was not released until 1980.

As to be expected, their war time experiences informed these legendary director’s future works and many of the films they later made are some of the classics we now associate with their names such as Huston’s “The Treasure of Sierra Madre” , Wyler’s “The Best Years of Our Lives” and Frank Capra’s “It’s a Wonderful Life”.

Narrated by Meryl Streep and accompanied by interviews with Stephen Spielberg, Benicio del Toro and Francis Ford Coppola, “Five Came Back” is both a portrait of gifted filmmakers at the top of their game and a compelling World War II history lesson. It is a real find,

(Netflix)

