

Film & Book Review

Five Came Back
Book by Mark Harris (2014)
Series directed by Laurent Bouzereau (2017)

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Author Note

The insights or views expressed in this review are those of the author. They do not reflect official policy of any of the institutions the author serves. The author has no conflicts of interest.

Introduction

As is the case with many who have experienced the singularly surreal drama of war, none of the titular five who came back – John Ford, John Huston, Frank Capra, William Wyler, or George Stevens – would have described themselves as heroes. For each of them, service to their country during World War II was not so much a choice but a conviction. It was a duty they were called to perform and which each performed admirably in his own way. However, the stories which *Five Came Back* (2014) tells, both on the page and on film, are nothing less than heroic. *Five Came Back* details the painstaking efforts each of these five men took in using their talents to assist the American war effort, the crippling price they paid to do so, and the personal, internal battles they fought against the consequences of the war.

The book compiles painstaking details about the lives these five lived, pulling one into gripping stories about what they had, what they willingly sacrificed, and what they lost throughout the course of the war. The documentary series on Netflix, boasting an all-star collection of directors such as Steven Spielberg, Paul Greengrass, Francis Ford Coppola, and Guillermo del Toro, and narrated by Meryl Streep, brings the words to life. It shows some of the footage described in the book, boiling down the detail and providing valuable third-party insight from the five themselves as well as from their colleagues and friends.

Expertly pieced together by Mark Harris, the book explores the tragic history and consequences of World War II through the lives of these five directors and illuminates an often-understated role in military history of that world-shaking conflict. The documentary series serves as an excellent complement to the book, providing valuable insight from peers and admirers of the five and illustrating the importance of what they brought back to the world of filmmaking.

Film & Book Summary

Broken into three parts, the book covers the lives of the five men before, during and at the conclusion of the Second World War. Part I gives a detailed and valuable history of Hollywood at the time and of the role of the political studio system in the lives of these five directors. It also provides a detailed exploration of the atmosphere of America in the run-up to the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. It presents the way that Hollywood had begun to express anti-fascist sentiment through filmmaking despite the vehement isolationist rhetoric employed by many prominent politicians of the time. It explores the mindset of men like the Warner brothers, founders of the studio that to this day bears their name, and many other studio heads who came from European Jewish heritage. It introduces us to the titular five men – directors John Ford, George Stevens, John Huston, William Wyler and Frank Capra – and the state of their standing in the film industry prior to Pearl Harbor.

Each of the five was, at the time, extremely prominent in Hollywood. John Ford had already won a collection of Oscar trophies, as had Frank Capra. Both were, at the time, considered the best in the game. Ford's list of triumphs included films such as *The Informer* (1935) and *Stagecoach* (1939), the latter of which served to launch John Wayne into the American lexicon. Ford was a glutton for adventure and bravado, with a powerful sense of duty to his nation. He was the first to volunteer, and at age 47 requested a transfer from the Naval Reserve to active duty. Capra had won three Best Director statues already for *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) and *You Can't Take It with You* (1938); yet his personal political philosophy was quite confused, even as the isolationists began to lose public favor. He volunteered for the Signal Corps at 44 years old. William Wyler, often nominated but never awarded, whose family had immigrated to the United States from a Franco-German border town many years before, likewise appeared to be at the height of his career when he volunteered for military service at age 39. His good friend, screenwriter and director John Huston, fresh off the success of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), was the youngest who volunteered to serve at 35, giving up what many people believed was the most promising budding career in movies. And George Stevens, a man known for his mastery of light comedy films and who suffered from asthma, pulled strings aplenty until, at 37, he was admitted into the Signal Corps and sent to Africa to film a record of the Allied advance.

Part II begins to chronicle the struggles each of these five directors would face in the performance of their duties. Their task was not simple – they were to document the American war effort, capture footage of battles, bombing runs, and entire campaigns, and transform what footage they managed to shoot into films which would inspire and motivate the movie-going public into unerring support for the war. Almost immediately, each of them ran into obstacles. John Ford was sent to Midway, unaware that he was being deployed for the purpose of filming a Japanese attack. Frank Capra began heading up the Signal Corps, attempting to create documentaries that would give young GIs and the American public a crash-course in the world politics that had led up to World War II. However, military red tape and harsh script opposition from top brass would prevent the series from being completed until the end of the war. William Wyler was sent to London for months having nothing to do but editing and advising British field photographers. Eventually he was sent on bombing missions with the Air Force, resulting in the wildly popular film, *Memphis Belle* (1944). John Huston was sent to the Aleutian Islands in Alaska. He was tasked with recording dry bombing runs over captured bases where

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he witnessed a friend experience a mental breakdown. George Stevens arrived in Africa weeks behind the Allied advance, but was still expected to produce enough action on film to craft a compelling narrative for home-front moviegoers. He would end up staging it almost entirely.

Part III details the end of each man's service, and of the war itself. John Ford would be deployed to film the assault on Omaha beach on D-Day. The memory of the events destroyed him to the point where he was effectively discharged due to multiple instances of excessive public drunkenness. He would continue to offer his services but was not called to the front again. Frank Capra's series of documentaries stalled out, leaving him with nearly nothing to show for his years of service and stranding him in a Hollywood that had moved on from him. William Wyler, deployed to Europe to film a follow-up to *Memphis Belle*, went AWOL attempting to visit the village his family had left so many years before. When he arrived, he discovered that nearly all of the villagers had been bombed and killed by American planes, having ignored the pamphlets dropped warning them to evacuate. When he returned, ready to film the documentary, he lost his hearing on one flight. He was sent home fearing that he would never be able to direct a film again. John Huston was sent to Italy shortly after its liberation to take footage of the locals welcoming American troops. Instead, he ended up filming truckloads of deceased soldiers, ancient towns and villas decimated by bombs, and his own unit under heavy fire. He returned home a changed man, unable to come to terms with the horrors he had seen until many years later. He would go on to direct a film about the recovery of returned soldiers suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that was blocked from release for 50 years by military authorities. George Stevens would perhaps change most from his pre-war self. He was assigned to cover and film the Allied liberation of the concentration camp at Dachau. The atrocities he saw permanently altered his worldview. In fact, he refused to make another comedy film upon his return --- and for several years afterwards.

Upon Reflection...

November 11th of this year marks the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I. As such, it seems particularly important to honor the memory of those who have served valiantly in all lines of duty. Mark Harris's book, and the documentary it inspired, reminds us that the fallout of war is far-reaching and potent, and that no one makes it through such experiences unchanged.

John Ford was a man who lusted after the perceived glory and dignity that some believe come with a life of military service. One of the potential reasons given for Ford's absolute willingness to give up his life of luxury and fame to join and contribute to the war effort was a rejected application to the Naval Academy early in his life. Yet much akin to the young men who fought in the trenches of Verdun many years before his time in the army, Ford would find that the realities of modern warfare did not necessarily fall in line with the mystic atmosphere surrounding them. His experiences on D-Day left him traumatized, turning more often than not to alcohol as a form of consolation in the immediate wake. What he brought back with him was a new understanding of the reality of military conflict, and a reawakened respect for those who so boldly would volunteer for it. He did not speak of D-Day in detail for months after the events.

Frank Capra returned to Hollywood and faced a struggle familiar to many who have left home for the purpose of war. Upon his return, he found the world he once called home had continued on without him. He felt that he had changed far too much during his time away to simply pick up where he left off. His first film after returning, *It's a Wonderful Life* (1947), beautifully exemplifies his struggle to regain his posture. In it, a man is shown an image of the world the way it would look had he never existed. Capra poured his soul into the film undoubtedly working through his own inner conflict throughout the process.

At the same time, William Wyler had returned to directing after several years of depression, induced by his loss of hearing. After his own experiences throughout the war, he wanted to bring the movie-going public a small taste of realism, rather than the glitz and glam with which he had usually tended to work in his films. His one film, *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1947), was the story of three veterans of the war fighting now to regain their footing in a homeland that seemed unable to understand them and the disabilities they returned with --- be they overt or psychological. Wyler thought back to his own experiences on the Memphis Belle, attempting to craft a film that would make the young men he had served with proud, and perhaps would help them work through their own post-war lives. *The Best Years of Our Lives* went on to win universal praise and the Academy Award for Best Picture.

John Huston, eager to leave the army, almost immediately had to fight for the release of his documentary *Let There Be Light*, about the trials and tribulations of veterans dealing with post-traumatic stress. He had been assigned to make the film so as to ease the assimilation of veterans to civilian life. Yet once it was completed, Huston was obstructed at every attempt to show the film. After months of fighting, he finally gave up --- a result which left him completely disillusioned with the military and kept the documentary from being shown for over 50 years.

George Stevens was completely upended after witnessing the horrors of Dachau. Once Hollywood's top comedy man, Stevens was unable to find a project he desired to work on for years after he returned to Los Angeles. Friends, family, and colleagues, including Capra, were unable to snap him out of his completely shell-shocked state. Eventually, he began directing again, finding some comfort in the resumption of his creative work. But for the rest of his career, he would never make another comedy.

As we commemorate the 100th year since the end of what was once considered the war to end all wars, it becomes important to understand that the process of healing is an imperfect one. Each of these five men experienced the reality of war in a different way and each was unalterably changed from that experience. All five worked in the same creative industry. Each of them worked through the memories and traumas in their own individual ways. They all brought something back - a powerful new understanding of the world and of mortality. And each of them, through necessity for their selves and for their comrades, sought to use their healing process didactically, helping themselves and others like them to understand and to rise from the ashes.

While they may have disputed it, each of the five directors explored in *Five Came Back* make this story one of undoubted nobility and heroism.