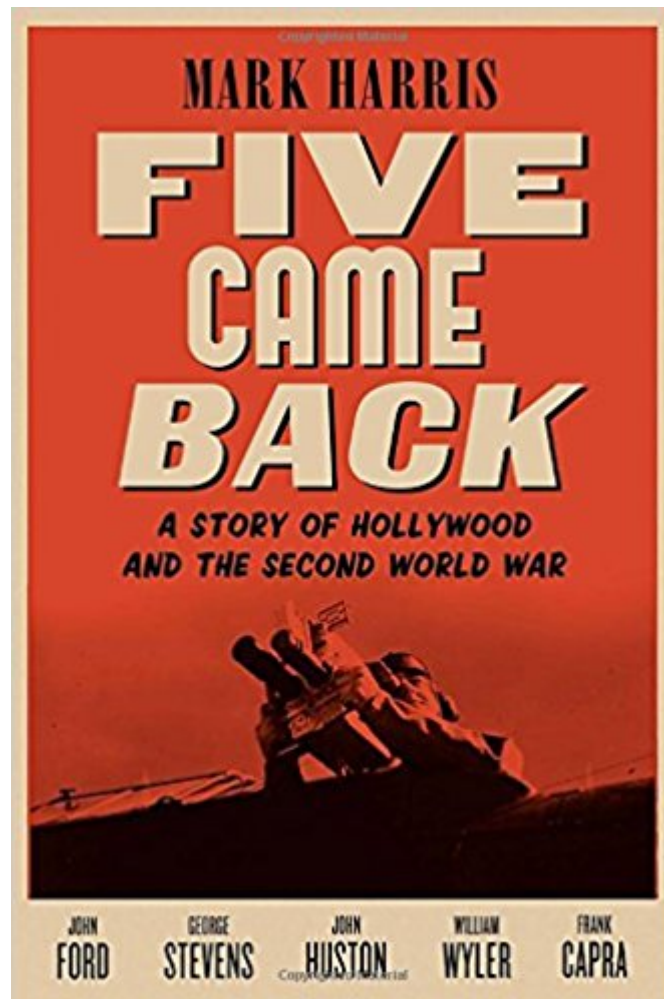


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# Five Came Back: A Story Of Hollywood And The Second World War



## Synopsis

The extraordinary wartime experience of five of Hollywood's most legendary directors, all of whom put their stamp on World War II and were changed forever by it. In *Pictures at a Revolution*, Mark Harris turned the story of the five movies nominated for Best Picture in 1967 into a landmark work of cultural history about the transformation of an art form and the larger social shift it signified. In *Five Came Back*, he gives us something even more remarkable: the untold story of how Hollywood changed World War II, and how World War II changed Hollywood, through the director's lens. It is little remembered now, but in prewar America, Hollywood's relationship with Washington was decidedly tense. Investigations into corruption and racketeering were multiplying, and hanging in the air was the insinuation that the business was too foreign, too Jewish, too un-American in its values and causes. Could an industry with such a powerful influence on America's collective mindset really be left in the hands of this crew? When war came, the propaganda effort to win the hearts and minds of American soldiers and civilians was absolutely vital. Nothing else had the power of film to educate and inspire. But the government was not remotely equipped to harness it, so FDR and the military had little choice but to turn to Hollywood for help. In an unprecedented move, the whole business was farmed out to a handful of Hollywood's most acclaimed film directors, accompanied by a creative freedom over film-making in combat zones that no one had ever had before or would ever have again. The effort was dominated by five directing legends: John Ford, William Wyler, John Huston, Frank Capra, and George Stevens. They were complicated, competitive men, gifted and flawed in equal measure, and they didn't always get along, with each other or with their military supervisors. But between them they were on the scene of almost every major moment of America's war and in every branch of service—army, navy, and air force, Atlantic and Pacific; from Midway to North Africa; from Normandy to the fall of Paris and the liberation of the Nazi death camps. In the end, though none of them emerged unscarred, they produced a body of work that was essential to how Americans perceived the war, and still do. The product of five years of original archival research, *Five Came Back* is an epic achievement, providing a revelatory new understanding of Hollywood's role in the war through the life and work of five men who chose to go, and who came back.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Five Hollywood directors volunteered for active duty after Pearl Harbor. They ranged in age from mid-thirties to late forties and had families to support. They were in no danger of being drafted at their age, and taking an indefinite leave from their careers was risky. They took huge cuts in pay to join up. They all accepted commissions and spent the war doing what they did best -- making movies.

I came into *Five Came Back* with a pretty sketchy idea of who these five directors were (Frank Capra, John Ford, John Huston, William Wyler, George Stevens). I remembered Capra did *It's a Wonderful Life* and John Ford did westerns, or was that John Huston? So, to be honest, I was ready to bail out if it turned out to be for insiders. Once I started the book though, I was hooked.

Mark Harris did a tremendous amount of research to track down the stories of the five. There's a fair amount of personal information and some gossipy bits, but mostly it's the story of the movies they made while they were in uniform. Since they were working for Uncle Sam and not for a movie studio or a news outlet, most of what they did was propaganda and training films. But because these were talented and creative men, they didn't churn out standard issue films. While all the stories are fascinating, that of George Stevens is the most gripping. He was with the first Allied unit that entered the Dachau concentration camp after the Germans had fled. No one was prepared for the horror. And as an army unit, they were unable to do much right away for the many inmates who had survived to that point. Stevens filmed as much as he could, and his film would be used as evidence during the Nuremberg Trials. The experience shattered him though, and it took years for him to recover enough to make movies again.

Five top Hollywood directors -- John Ford, Frank Capra, John Huston, William Wyler, and George Stevens -- enlisted in the armed services for World War II to offer their skills in documenting the conflict. Ford, the most prescient of the five, actually joined the Navy several months before Pearl

Harbor. All had made classic films before the war. All of them put their very lucrative careers on hold, with no guarantee that they would or could resume them afterward. Except for Capra, all of them saw action. Capra stayed in the US to help organize Hollywood's war effort and the army's propaganda. James Agee remarked in one of his film essays that most of these men's work deepened after the war, and this book shows you why. Harris also paints a detailed picture of the complex relationships among the studios, the military, and the movie-going public. Ford, famously, was wounded during the Battle of Midway. Wyler risked his life filming bombing runs over Germany and actually lost his hearing trying to get a particular shot. Ford and Stevens filmed the D-Day landings at Omaha and Juno beaches, respectively. Stevens documented (he realized immediately that his footage would be used as evidence) the liberation of Dachau. He would not allow his men to film the worst of it, but shot the crematoria and other footage himself. Huston worked mainly in Italy. Capra spent his war mainly creating the Why We Fight series, in the process coming up with many narrative innovations that we now take for granted. Harris also contrasts these men with other Hollywood people who served. Darryl F. Zanuck, the head of 20th-Century Fox, strutted like a popinjay in his tailored uniforms and insisted on being addressed as "Colonel." He squandered resources and produced nothing usable.

"Five Came Back: A Story of Hollywood and the Second World War" examines the impact that the Second World War had on the Hollywood film-making community in general, and five top directors — William Wyler, John Ford, John Huston, Frank Capra, and George Stevens — in particular. It is a well-researched volume with considerable detail (sometimes too much, frankly) which brings to light aspects of the uncomfortable alliance between civilian filmmakers and their military counterparts that most readers, even WW II aficionados, might not be aware of. The partnership between the Hollywood community and the military film-making establishment that was forged in hurried fashion when the United States was plunged into war on December 7th, 1941 was never an easy one, and the varied wartime careers of the five notable film directors around which the volume is structured brings this fact to light. Treading carefully with government and military information establishments which often viewed them as slightly untrustworthy, liberal-tending dilettantes, these five men brought their own personal and political baggage to the task of making training films and morale-boosting documentaries for the civilian and military populations. John Huston was a thrill-seeking adventurer who firmly supported the war, Frank Capra was a timid sort whose beliefs wavered with the current political wind — his only true conviction the fear of being ostracized. While some went to the front, in harm's way — notably John Ford and John Huston — others contributed

from the home front; Frank Capra, for example. For all the trials and tribulations these five men encountered, the over-arching impression that I came away with was that they didn't really accomplish much.

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