

U.S. documentary  
& the propaganda effort in WWII

# U.S. 1941-1945

U.S. enters WWII after Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor – Hawaii  
December 7, 1941

WWII brought English-language documentary together

Great Britain   Canada   United States

Viewed one another's documentaries

Exchanged materials – stock-shot library footage

combat & captured enemy footage

Made compilation films & joint productions – “victory series”

Documentary & fiction filmmakers in these countries worked together

Four types of war films in the US

training - not documentaries

indoctrination

records of battle

social documentaries

# 1. The Indoctrination film

U.S. Armed Forces called them “orientation” films

Key series *Why We Fight* produced by Frank Capra

Capra & collaborators - no prior documentary experience

The Capra unit – attached to the Office of War Information –  
made other large scale orientation films

*Know Your Ally* – Britain 1943

*Here is Germany* 1945

*Know Your Enemy* – Japan 1946

## *Why We Fight* series 1942-1945

Assumption – soldiers would be more committed & fight better  
if the causes for WWII were understood

Goal – explain reasons for U.S. participation in the war

Point of View – historical treatise

viewpoint of Roosevelt administration

- New Deal Democratic

Structure - seven films

compilation of existing footage

newsreels, Allied & captured records of battle

U.S. fiction features, Nazi propaganda films

edited as a fiction film

voice-of-God narrator – guided commentary

## Films in the series

*Prelude to War* 1942

*The Nazis Strike* 1943

*Divide and Conquer* 1943

*The Battle of Britain* 1943

*The Battle of Russia* 1943

*The Battle of China* 1944

*War Comes to America* 1945

Short features - 50 minutes

Shown to military personnel – obligatory viewing

Later released theatrically

# Design of the series

**Challenge** - How to give **structure** to vast & disparate materials

**Strategies** - dramatic form

exposition, conflict, climax, denouement

each film can be broken into acts

visual & audio resources

film clips, dramatization, animated diagrams

still photos, drawings & maps, headlines,  
printed titles

soundtrack

narrator, quoted dialogue, music ,  
sound effects editing

narrative & expressive purpose

## 2. Records of battle

Most made by Hollywood veterans - John Ford

John Huston

William Wyler

Ford - film unit attached to the Navy

*The Battle of Midway* 1942 won Academy award

*December 7* 1943 recreation of Pearl Harbor attack

Huston - *Report from the Aleutians* 1943

*The Battle of San Pietro* 1945

Wyler - *Memphis Belle* 1944

*Thunderbolt* 1945

## Other combat films

Made collaboratively by film crews of  
army, navy & air force

Notable films about war in the Pacific

*The Battle for the Marianas* 1944

*To the Shores of Iwo Jima* 1945

*Fury in the Pacific* 1945

*The Fighting Lady* 1944



### 3. The social documentary

Made by Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, federal agency  
Designed as public relations tools to increase economic &  
political cooperation with Latin America

*The Bridge* 1944

*High Plain* 1943

*The Grain that Built a Hemisphere* 1943 - Disney studios

*Water – Friend or Enemy* 1944 - Disney

1942 Office of War Information

created to coordinate government information  
liaison with Hollywood studios through its

Motion Picture Bureau

# The Motion Picture Bureau

Divided in two sections

Domestic Branch

made films for U.S. civilians

Overseas Branch

for allies, neutral countries & those formerly  
occupied by Germany & Japan

distinguished production record  
made by documentary veterans

*Autobiography of a Jeep* 1943

*Pacific Northwest* 1944

*Hymn of the Nations* 1944

# The Case of *Let There Be Light* 1946

Directed by John Huston

Produced by the Army Pictorial Service

intended for civilian audiences

showed the mental & emotional casualties of war

Examined the rehabilitation of psychosomatically disabled  
soldiers

Released 40 years after it was made

Exposes the toll war takes on soldiers

# Conclusions

By end of WWII – documentary had reached a pinnacle

Financial investment

Talent involved

Theatrical & non - theatrical releases

## Documentaries about Hollywood & WWII

- *Hollywood Goes to War* (1994) dir. Frank Capra Jr.
- *John Ford Goes to War* (2005) dir. Tom Thurman
- *To Tell the Truth* – Episode 3: “The Strategy of Truth - Documentary Goes to War” (1933-1945) (2013)  
dir. Van Taylor)
- *Five Came Back* (2017) – 3-episode miniseries,  
dir. Laurent Bouzereau