

## Filming the Camps: From Hollywood to Nuremberg

*I couldn't continue to make films like before. – George Stevens*

Hollywood directors John Ford, George Stevens, and Samuel Fuller provided audiences with cinema classics, including *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Shane*, and *The Big Red One*. But their most important contribution to history was their work in the U.S. Armed Forces and Secret Services, filming the realities of war and the liberation of Nazi concentration camps. Their documentation provides an essential visual record of the horrors of WWII.

The Atlanta History Center is honored to be one of only two U.S. venues to host the exhibition, *Filming the Camps – John Ford, Samuel Fuller, George Stevens: From Hollywood to Nuremberg*. The exhibition looks at these three directors and their film documentation of WWII and concentration camp liberation, its use as evidence during the Nuremberg trials (the first time movies were used as evidence), and as inspiration for Hollywood cinema. Artifacts include rare film footage, interviews, manuscripts, photographs, director's notes, and additional video of WWII. *Filming the Camps* explores these filmmakers' experiences during and after WWII, their confrontation with Nazi atrocities, and the mark it left on them as artists.

The curator, Christian Delage, designed the exhibition with the narrative at the center of the display, allowing the visitor to experience content rather than extensive text, and to keep the atmosphere appropriate to the subject matter.

"My main goal with the exhibit is to enable the audience to view the footage in its historical context and read the accompanying narratives written by the cameramen and writers, practically in real-time, as soon as they finished shooting for the day," said Delage. "This level of detail adds much to our comprehension of the conditions of the camps and the complex experience of liberation from both the liberators and the inmates' points of view."

### Three Filmmakers from Hollywood

In the early 1930s, John Ford, a member of the Navy reserve, established a unit of cameramen for the service. In 1939, the photographic unit of the 11th Naval Section became operational with a crew of sixty technicians by 1941. During the war, Ford headed the Field Photographic Branch, crafting Oscar-winning documentaries about Pearl Harbor and Midway. In 1945, he compiled images of Dachau taken by Stevens' crew into a documentary later used as evidence of war crimes at the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg. Ford also supervised the Field Photographic Branch filming of the actual Nuremberg Trials.

George Stevens, famous for his Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers movies, directed the Special Coverage Unit during the war under orders from General Dwight Eisenhower. Known as "The Hollywood Irregulars," Stevens' forty-five-man film crew was composed of cameramen, writers, sound operators, and assistant directors. The crew covered D-Day, the Allied march through France, and the liberation of Dachau, April 29, 1945. After the war, one of Stevens' noteworthy projects was the 1959 film, *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

### Further Reading



*Five Came Back: A Story of Hollywood and the Second World War* by Mark Harris

[Click here](#) to buy it online.

[Click here](#) to find it in a library.

Samuel Fuller, the son of two Jewish immigrants – his mother, Polish, and his father, Russian – established himself as a moviemaker after WWII. Prior to joining the 1st Infantry Division in 1942, he worked as a crime reporter and later had a career as a scriptwriter. At the instruction of his captain, he filmed the liberation of the Falkenau camp, using a camera that his mother had sent him. This was his first filming experience. He subsequently had a successful film career, directing more than twenty-five films, including the 1980 film, *The Big Red One*, which reflects on his wartime experiences.

### **A Team of Professionals with a Precise Mission**

The exhibition focuses on the Dachau and Falkenau camps and enables the public to understand the particular working conditions of the American cameramen. The teams established by Ford and Stevens contained professionally recognized, experienced filmmakers trained for the task.

The Field Photographic Branch work orders display how the cameramen who were to be faced with Nazi crimes were to follow precise instructions in recording the events they were about to witness – the question of the validity of the film footage as evidence in the subsequent trial had already been raised.

The cameramen were to draft a commentary each day of filming, either in the form of a “caption sheet,” or in a more elaborate “master caption report.” In the “weekly photographic report,” one of the Special Coverage Unit officers, often Stevens himself, drafted a summary of the week’s filming.

For the first time, the exhibition presents a selection of the footage in chronological order accompanied by a facsimile of the cameramen’s commentary.

### **From Documentary to Fiction**

After having filmed war and genocide on-site, what is the impact of that history on the later work of these filmmakers? The overlap between fiction and documentary reveals the ethics of the filmmakers and the historical awareness that guided them.

With four Academy Awards, John Ford is the most decorated director in film history with *The Informer*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *How Green Was My Valley*, and *The Quiet Man*. In addition to those four, he also received Oscars for his two wartime documentaries, *The Battle of Midway* and *December 7th*. During his postwar career he directed additional military-based films, including *They Were Expendable* and *Mister Roberts*.

Before the war, George Stevens was the director of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, and Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy, as well as Cary Grant, Irene Dunne, and Carole Lombard. Afterward, he was the award-winning director of more serious cinema, including *A Place in the Sun*, *Shane*, and *Giant* – these and other films dealing with social class, homicide, alcoholism, gambling, and violence. His wartime legacy is undoubtedly his 1959 film, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, which received three Academy Awards.

In his 1959 film, *Verboten!*, Samuel Fuller, who filmed the liberation of the Falkenau camp, May 6, 1945, shows the screening of George Stevens’ footage of the Dachau camp liberation – as edited by John Ford – before the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg. His film *The Big Red One* made in 1980 uses a sequence in Falkenau.