

Suggested movies to understand World War II

View these movies to better understand the situation during the period of World War II, especially how that generation saw the war and reacted to it. Many of these movies were released during the war under conditions of censorship and before all facts were known, so our understanding of events since then may have changed. Movies about historic events are often as much about the values and perspectives of the time they were made as they are a reflection of the time they are about. Remember that as you view these films to help to put events into context. Some of these movies are available on the internet, others at the library, and some from commercial sources.

Home Front:

- *Why We Fight, Prelude to War*. 1943, Documentary, 52 min, won 1 Oscar
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrwT2K3SwGk>
 - Walter Huston (Narrator), Frank Capra (director), Walt Disney (animator)
 - Archive film footage used as a US Army training film to explain “why we fight.” It shows American perceptions at the time. The first in a series of films on this topic.

- *The Human Comedy*. 1943, Drama, 117 min, won 1 Oscar and 4 more nominations
 - Mickey Rooney, Frank Morgan, Marsha Hunt, Van Johnson, Donna Reed
 - A small town teenager looks after his family earning a living as a telegram delivery boy, while his older brother is in the Army and younger brother comes of age. This is one of several American films shown to German POWs to teach them about American life.

- *Bombardier*. 1943, Drama, 99 min, Pat O’Brein, Randolph Scott, Eddie Albert, 1 Oscar nom
 - A semi-documentary about a school to train Air Corps bombardiers in New Mexico. Explores the dilemmas of high altitude precision bombing, with a climatic battle sequence.

- *Winged Victory*. 1944, Drama, 130 min, Lon McCallister, Jeanne Crain, Edmond O’Brein
 - Training was a big part of going to war, and this movie follows five aviation cadets as they become Air Corps pilots from tedium, to joy, and tragedy.

- *Since You Went Away*. 1944, Drama-Romance, 177 min, won 1 Oscar and 8 nominations
 - Claudette Colbert, Jennifer Jones, Joseph Cotton, Shirley Temple, Lionel Barrymore
 - Coping on the home front by taking in lodgers, dealing with shortages, and trouble with love

- *Miracle on Morgan's Creek*. 1944, Comedy-Romance, 98 min, nominated for 1 Oscar
 - Eddie Bracken, Betty Hutton, Diana Lynn, William Demarest
 - After a farewell party to the troops, a local girl can't remember who she married, and must find a way out of her predicament.

- *Secret Agent X-9*. 1945, Fiction–Adventure, 246 min (13 episodes), Lloyd Bridges, Keye Luke
 - Based on a comic strip adapted to the war, this is Saturday matinee children’s film where an American agent tries to counter German and Japanese spies and war efforts

- *The Best Years of our Lives*. 1946, Drama-Romance, 172 min, won 7 Oscars
 - Myrna Loy, Fredric March, Dana Andrews, Teresa Wright, Hoagy Carmichael
 - Three WWII veterans return home from WWII to small-town America to discover that they and their families have been irreparably changed.

- *Biloxi Blues*. 1988, Comedy-Drama, 106 min, 3 Tony awards for play
 - Matthew Broderick, Christopher Walken, Matt Mulhern, Penelope Ann Miller
 - From Neal Simon's award winning Broadway play, a New York City teenager goes through Army basic training in Mississippi during World War II in a classic coming of age story.
- *American Pastime*. 2007, Romance-Drama, 105 min
 - Aaron Yoo, Olesya Rulin, Carlton Bluford, Sami Roe
 - The forced resettlement of Japanese-American families to the Utah desert during World War II, and how they overcome racism through embracing jazz, baseball, and the war effort.
- *The War*. 2007, Documentary, 7 episodes of 2 hour each
 - Ken Burns, Director; Keith David, Narrator. Rest of cast portraying themselves.
 - This documentary examines American participation in World War II, especially through the eyes of people on the home front. Especially tracks the war's impact on four communities in California, Alabama, Wisconsin, and Connecticut through economic and social changes.

European Theater:

- *Action in the North Atlantic*. 1943, Drama, 126 min, Humphrey Bogart, Raymond Massey, Alan Hale, Julie Bishop
 - The U.S. Merchant Marine took more casualties per capita than any other military service. This story tells of a liberty ship bound for Murmansk through the German U-Boat infested North Atlantic, and how an American tanker crew survives at sea after sinking.
- *Sahara*. 1943, Drama, 97 min, Humphrey Bogart, Bruce Bennett, Carrol Naish; 3 Oscar noms
 - In June, 1942, a small detachment of American tanks and crews, joined the British Eighth Army in North Africa to get experience in desert warfare under actual battle conditions. Realistically shows the brutal conditions, and international nature of the war.
- *Memphis Belle*. 1944, Documentary, 45 min. Dir, William Wyler, crew played by themselves <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sn0IHROvqGM>
 - Documentary about the 25th and last bombing mission of a B17, the "Memphis Belle". The "Memphis Belle" took part in a great bombing raid on sub-pens in Wilhelmshafen, Germany
- *The Battle for San Pietro*. 1945, Documentary, 32 min. Major John Huston is director-narrator <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0S6l3FKGYnQ>
 - A documentary filmed about the battle for a small village in Italy in which 1,100 US soldiers died. The Army originally refused to release this film considering it too damaging to morale.
- *The Story of G.I. Joe*. 1945, Biography-Drama, 108 min, Burgess Meredith, Robert Mitchum
 - Famous war correspondent Ernie Pyle follows an infantry company in its battles in North Africa and Italy telling the true story of soldiers, many portrayed by actual combat veterans.
- *13 Rue Madeleine*. 1947, Drama-Action, 95 min. James Cagney, Annabella, Richard Conte
 - This is a documentary style story of the Office of Strategic Services, the US Army espionage agency, that would become the Central Intelligence Agency. This is a fictional story of operations against the secret German rocket program and counter a German mole.
- *Command Decision*. 1948, Drama-Action, 112 min
 - Clark Gable, Walter Pidgeon, Van Johnson, John Hodiak, Edward Arnold

- The difficult decisions of war balancing mission against people, weather, and politics are shown as Eighth Air Force bombers strike vital targets in Germany
- *Twelve O'Clock High*. 1949, Drama-Action, 132 min, won 2 Oscars
 - Gregory Peck, Gary Merrill, Millard Mitchell, Hugh Marlowe
 - The story of the early days of daylight bombing raids over Germany, and a commander who turns a "hard luck" bomber group into a disciplined unit despite heavy losses.
- *Battle Ground*. 1949, Drama-Action, 118 min, won 2 Oscars and nominated for 4 more
 - Van Johnson, John Hodiak, Ricardo Montalban, George Murphy
 - During the battle of the Bulge, American troops are surrounded and low on supplies, but refused to surrender. A study in psychology and morale, as much as action on the front.
- *The Longest Day*. 1962, Drama-Action, 178 min, won 2 Oscars and 3 more nominations
 - Eddie Albert, Richard Burton, Sean Connery, Henry Fonda, Robert Mitchum, John Wayne
 - The "D-Day" Allied invasion of Europe weaves together the story of many participants using a cast of 42 all-star actors. Covers the most momentous event on the western front.
- *The War Lover*. 1962, Drama-Action, 105 min, Steve McQueen, Robert Wagner
 - A World War II bomber pilot fails at everything not involving flying. He flies the most dangerous missions, but brings his crew back. Based on the better John Hersey novel.
- *The Victors*. 1963, Drama, 175 min, nominated for 1 Golden Globe award
 - George Peppard, Peter Fonda, James Mitchum, George Hamilton, Vince Edwards
 - The story follows in the footsteps of a squad of young American soldiers from the Battle of Britain, through the fierce fighting in Italy and France, to capturing Berlin.
- *Anzio*. 1968, Drama, 117 min, Robert Michum, Peter Falk, Arthur Kennedy, Robert Ryan
 - One of WWII's bloodiest battles as the Allies smash through the German lines at this Italian beachhead. Four months and 30,000 casualties before the Allies finally march to Rome.
- *World at War*. 1970, Documentary, 26 episodes each one hour, Laurence Olivier, narrator.
 - Perhaps the most accurate, comprehensive, and compelling view of World War II covering each of the belligerents: combat, atrocities, causes, and events afterwards.
- *A Bridge Too Far*. 1977, Drama, 175 min, Sean Connery, Ryan O'Neal, Michael Caine.
 - A historic telling of the failed attempt to capture several bridges to Germany by American, British, and Polish paratroopers in Operation Market-Garden in 1944.
- *Ike: Countdown to D-Day*. 2004, Drama, 89 min, Tom Selleck, James Remar, Nom 6 Emmys.
 - A historic drama of the 3 months before the D-Day operations in 1944 from Dwight Eisenhower's appointment as Supreme Allied Commander through the decision process and tribulations of organizing and executing the largest amphibious assault in history.
- *Red Tails*. 2012, Drama-Action, 125 min
 - Terrence Howard, Nate Parker, Tristan Wilds, Elijah Kelley, Daniela Ruah
 - A segregated fighter group fights both discrimination and Germans in making their mark during ground support and bomber escort duties flying from Italy. The special affects are over the top, but the story is very real, and perhaps understated.
- *Fury*. 2014, Drama- Action, 134 min. Brad Pitt, Shia LaBeouf, Logan Lerman, Micheal Pena

- In April 1945 as the allies make their final push into Germany a veteran Sherman tank commander takes his crew behind enemy lines on a daring mission.

Pacific Theater:

- *Wake Island*. 1942. Action-Drama, 87 min, Brian Donlevy, Robert Preston. Nom for 4 Oscars
 - December, 1941. With no hope of relief or re-supply, a small band of United States Marines try to keep the Japanese from capturing their island base in the opening days of the war.
- *Bataan*. 1943. Drama, 114 min, Robert Taylor, George Murphy, Thomas Mitchell, Desi Arnaz
 - A patrol of American and Filipino soldiers are part of the desperate defense of the Bataan peninsula fighting off the Japanese invasion in early 1942.
- *Air Force*. 1943. Drama, 124 min, John Garfield, John Ridgely, Gig Young
 - True to history, this is the story of a B-17 bomber crew that arrived at Pearl Harbor during the attack, and then goes to participate in other missions during the war. Great flying scenes, although the last 30 minutes are fictional, a montage of other events.
- *With the Marines at Tarawa*. 1943. Documentary, 19 min, Marines play themselves, 1 Oscar. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISzlohU1Zi4>
 - This short documentary released by the Marine Corps, was one of the first showing American casualties and shocked the American public. This gives a realistic if censored view of one of the early island battles. Two photographers were killed filming this.
- *Destination Tokyo*. 1943. Action-Drama, 135 min. Cary Grant, John Garfield. Nom 1 Oscar
 - A fictional account of a US submarine that sneaks into Tokyo Bay to place a spy team ashore in order to provide information for the first air raid over Tokyo, a U.S.
- *The Fighting Sullivans*. 1944. Drama, 112 min, Anne Baxter, Thomas Mitchell; nom 1 Oscar
 - The lives of five brothers growing up in Iowa during the days of the Great Depression and their eventual deaths in action in the Pacific theater are based on a true story.
- *The Fighting Seabees*. 1944, Drama-Romance, 100 min, John Wayne, Susan Hayward
 - The Navy's Construction Battalions were important to the island hopping campaign in the Pacific. This shows how the CBs worked on a remote Pacific island fighting the Japanese.
- *The Purple Heart*. 1944. Drama, 99 min, Dana Andrews, Richard Conte, Farley Granger
 - Several Doolittle Raider airmen were captured after bombing Tokyo. This is their true story of being prisoners of war, what they suffered, and eventual execution--depicted accurately.
- *The Battle of Midway*. 1945, Documentary, 18 min, won an Oscar <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7OBw0r28qC0&NR=1>
 - Henry Fonda & Jane Darwell (narrators), John Ford (director) was wounded during filming
 - Actual battle footage of the 1942 pivotal naval battle in which American forces defeated the Japanese navy. Compare to the 1976 dramatization of the battle, *Midway* with Henry Fonda
- *God is My Co-Pilot*. 1945, Biography, 90 min, Dennis Morgan, Ray Massey, Andrea King
 - True story of a USAAF transport pilot flying over The Hump to China, becomes one of the Famed Flying Tigers flying fighters against the Japanese. This is one of several American films shown to German POWs to teach them about American life.

- *They Were Expendable*. 1945, Drama, 135 min, Robert Montgomery, John Wayne, Donna Reed, Jack Holt, director John Ford. Nominated for 2 Oscars
 - Shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, a squadron of PT-Boats battle the Japanese in the Philippines. Based on the life of John Bulkeley who won a Medal of Honor.
- *Sands of Iwo Jima*. 1949, Drama-Action-Romance, 100 min, nominated for 4 Oscars
 - John Wayne, John Agar, Adele Mara, Forrest Tucker
 - A grizzled Marine sergeant trains his men hard for combat, in the hopes they will survive the bloody Pacific fighting. Compare to the more modern movie, *Flags of Our Fathers*.
- *Victory at Sea*. 1954, Documentary, 98 min (film version of 26 TV episodes)
 - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ausVC2NhAo>
 - Through war time film footage, this film tells the story of the US Navy and Marine Corps in the Atlantic and Pacific Theaters. Noted for its music score and combat film footage.
- *South Pacific*. 1958, Musical, 157 min, won 1 Oscar and 2 nominations; Rossano Brazzi, Mitzi Gaynor, music by Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein, author James Michener
 - Based on a Broadway hit play and the experiences of the author, life on a small navy base in the South Pacific is alive with war and romance. This confronts the stereotypes of inter-racial relations and is a gorgeous depiction of the island's landscape.
- *Tora! Tora! Tora!*. 1970, Drama-Action, 144 min, won 1 Oscar and 7 more nominations
 - Martin Balsam, So Yamamura, E. G. Marshall, James Whitmore, Tatuya Mihashi
 - A dramatization of the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, depicting the diplomatic actions and military preparations that ended with the destruction of the US fleet and entry into WWII.
- *The Great Raid*. 2009, Drama-Action-Romance, 132 min
 - Benjamin Bratt, James Franco, Connie Nielsen, Robert Mammone
 - In 1945, after the American invasion of the Philippines, a US Army Ranger company stages a raid 30 miles behind Japanese lines, with the help of the Filipino resistance, to rescue 500 American POWs from extermination.
- *Unbroken*. 2014, Biography, 120 min, Jack O'Connell, Domhnall Gleeson, Jai Courtney
 - A chronicle of the remarkable life of Louis Zamperini, an Olympic runner, and navigator who was taken prisoner by Japanese forces during World War II.

Occupation Duty:

- *A Bell for Adano*. 1945, Drama, 103 min, the novel won a Pulitzer Prize
 - Gene Tierney, John Hodiak, William Bendix
 - A US Army major's unit is assigned to an occupied war-torn Italian town, in which they must manage its colorful citizens and problems without interfering with the rest of the war effort.
- *Battle of the Peace*. 1945, Documentary, 9:59 min.
 - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0A1G1ZqVhg>
 - This Army news release shows the result of Allied bombing on the German city of Cologne, and then discusses the role of American occupation forces in de-nazification, and the military government (MG) in helping Germany to recover after the war.
- *A Foreign Affair*. 1948, Comedy-Romance, 116 min, nominated for 2 Oscars
 - Jean Arthur, Marlene Dietrich, John Lund, Millard Mitchell

- In this fictional account, a US Congressional delegation visits occupied Berlin to investigate the moral standards of soldiers stationed there. The investigation turns awry when the roles of the people involved get unexpectedly entwined.
- *Tokyo Joe*. 1949, Drama, 88 min, Humphrey Bogart, Florence Marly, Sessue Hayakawa
 - An American returns to his pre-war haunts in Tokyo after the war to find that much has changed. This movie shows defeated Japan after the war under the American occupation.
- *The Big Lift*. 1950, Drama, 120 min, Montgomery Clift, Paul Douglas, Cornell Borchers
 - Shot on site in Berlin immediately after the Berlin Airlift ended, this shows how the city was kept in Allied hands despite being cutoff by Soviet forces -- starting the Cold War. Most of the actors are actual Air Force members. Shows the ruins of occupied Germany just after World War II ended, and what life was like under military occupation in Germany.
- *House of Bamboo*. 1955, Crime, 102 min, Robert Ryan, Roger Stack, Shirley Yamaguchi
 - A gangster melodrama filmed with post-war Tokyo as the backdrop. An Army cop works to counter the crime and murder of Japanese gangs.
- *The Teahouse of the August Moon*. 1956, Comedy, 123 min, Marlon Brando, Glenn Ford, Machikyo Kyo, Eddie Albert, Harry Morgan, nominated for 6 Golden Globes.
 - This is a satire on American ambitions to democratize an Okinawan village after World War II by building a school, when the wily villagers prefer that a tea house be built. Many themes in this movie can be seen in modern stability operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.
- *Emperor*. 2012, History-Drama, 105 min, Matthew Fox, Tommy Lee Jones, Eriko Hatsune
 - After the Japanese surrender in WWII, GEN Douglas McArthur tasks one of his officers to investigate whether the emperor was a war criminal, navigating between keeping the peace in ravaged Japan and the search for justice or retribution by the Allies.

Compiled in 2010 for the Silver Spring Veterans Memorial, PA. Updated 2012, 2013, 2014. and 2015 comments to bouchatc@hotmail.com