

Jimmy Stewart showed us that 'It's A Wonderful Life'



JIMMY STEWART, one of Hollywood's most beloved actors, would be appalled by the popularity of today's movies that glorify war and the platinum heroes who star in them.

Stewart was a genuine hero, a highly decorated fighter pilot who flew 20 combat missions against Nazi Germany during World War II. After the war, he refused to act in any movie about the conflict or his role in it. It contradicted his personal code of honor.

Instead, Stewart, a bona fide star before the war, renewed his Hollywood career with a film that celebrates life and has become an annual holiday classic: "It's A Wonderful Life." Inspired by the actor's desperate need to put World War II behind him, this beloved film continues to attract new audiences 65 years later.

During his 43-year film career, Stewart, a native Pennsylvanian, matured from leading man to a beloved national icon. His classic performances in "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" (1939) and "The Philadelphia Story" (1940) made him a box office star with an awkward but endearing way of muttering asides and of providing memorable double takes and affably wry retorts.

But in March 1941, with war looming on America's horizon, Stewart, then 33, abandoned Hollywood to enlist in the U.S. Army Air Corps. His decision shocked Hollywood at a time when other stars were hoping to avoid service. Louis Mayer, the head of MGM Studios, even offered Stewart incentives to keep him out of uniform. But he refused.

After the United States entered the war, the military brass initially refused to send

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the actor into combat. If Stewart was shot down in enemy territory and taken prisoner, he could be used as a pawn to obtain important concessions from the United States.

While frustrated, Stewart never complained nor made any attempt to pull strings. Instead, he spent two years proving his mettle by flying around-the-clock as a B-17 instructor pilot. He rose from a private to a captain in command of his own squadron in the 445th Bomb Group.

On Nov. 11, 1943, Stewart was granted his wish to enter combat. Assigned to fly B-24 Liberators for the 453rd Bomb Group at Old Buckenham, England, he flew 20 combat missions against the Nazis, including one over Berlin. His bravery and leadership in combat earned him a Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal and the French Croix de Guerre.

World War II had profoundly affected Stewart. He had seen the horrors of combat and it changed him both physically and psychologically. Gone was the boyish innocence of his pre-war films, replaced by a tougher, more hardened appearance. He refused to discuss the war, revel in his heroic contributions or make a film that glorified the brutality and devastation of combat. He believed that it would belittle the sacrifice of those people who died for their country.

Stewart also considered retiring from the Silver Screen. Acting seemed "trivial" in light of his wartime experience. Film director Frank Capra understood Stewart's need

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to put the war behind him as well as the country's desire to have its spirits lifted and wrote a screenplay to address those needs.

"It's A Wonderful Life" is about George Bailey, a small-town citizen down on his luck, and a Christmas Eve visit from Clarence Oddbody, his bumbling guardian angel. Oddbody shows Bailey (played by Stewart) how meaningless the lives of others would be without his life-long kindness and restores his faith.

Released near Christmas 1946, "It's A Wonderful Life" was a box office disappointment, panned by many critics for being "too sentimental." Nor did it win a single Academy Award.

But the film's timeless message of "redemption through faith" and its countless television re-runs since the 1980s have made it one of the most beloved movies of all-time and a perennial holiday favorite.

Shortly before his death in 1997, Stewart declared it his "favorite film" because it is "a timeless image of the American way of life and the values that made this country great: duty, honor, service to others, and a strong, unconditional love of family and country."

Sometimes movie-goers don't appreciate what they have until it's gone. In Jimmy Stewart, we all had something pretty special.

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