

# Walt Disney Goes to War

by Lisa Briner

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By Lisa Briner, US Army Heritage and Education Center



*Hal Olsen, a professional nose artist, paints "The Ruptured Duck" on the nose of a B-25B bomber at the Pacific Aviation Museum on Ford Island, Hawaii, to commemorate the historical aircraft's exhibit. Olsen, a retired naval aviation mechanic, started his art career more than 60 years ago during World War II. U.S. Navy photo.*

An important factor ensuring America's ultimate victory over the Axis Powers in World War II was the overwhelming and unwavering support of the Home Front. Contributing much to creating and maintaining that Home Front support were Walt Disney films. Meanwhile, morale-boosting Disney-designed insignia that soon appeared on planes, trucks, flight jackets, and other military equipment accomplished the same for American and Allied forces.

During the war Disney made films for every branch of the U.S. government. Typical of the films was the 1943 "The Spirit of '43," produced at the request of the Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau, Jr. The film depicted Donald Duck dealing with federal income taxes and pointing out the benefit of paying his taxes in support of the American war effort.

At the Navy's request, the Disney Studios also produced, in just three months, some 90,000 feet of training film to educate sailors on navigation tactics. Disney animators also worked closely with Hollywood producer Frank Capra and created what many consider to be the most brilliant animated maps to appear in a series of seven highly successful "Why We Fight" films.

During the war, over 90 percent of Disney employees were devoted to the production of training and

propaganda films. In all, the Disney Studios produced some 400,000 feet of film representing some 68 hours of continuous film. Included among the films produced was "Der Fuehrer's Face," again featuring Donald Duck. It won the Oscar as the best animated film for 1943.

Perhaps the importance of the Disney Studios to the war effort is best demonstrated by the fact that the U.S. Army deployed troops to protect the facilities, the only Hollywood studio accorded such treatment.

During World War I, while serving as a Red Cross ambulance driver, Walt Disney embellished his ambulance and other vehicles with drawings and cartoon figures. Thus, he came to appreciate the importance of humorous insignia to unit morale and esprit-de-corps. It is not surprising, therefore, that during World War II Disney artists often used their talents to design military insignia and emblems.

For example, in 1942 the Navy asked Disney to design an emblem appropriate for its new fleet of Navy torpedo boats known as "mosquito boats." In response, Disney provided its famous emblem of a mosquito riding a torpedo, which soon adorned all of the newly constructed PT boats. At the request of the China Defense Supplies organization, the Disney Studios also designed a winged tiger flying through a large V for victory for the world-famous "Flying Tigers." By war's end, the Disney Studios had produced over 1,200 insignias for both the U.S. Army and Navy, as well as Allied units, without ever charging a fee.



*Shoulder Sleeve insignia of the Womens Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron, later called the Womens Army Service Pilots. The patch depicts the Walt Disney Studios designed "Fifinella," coming in for a landing. Army Heritage Museum patch.*

ABOUT THIS STORY: Many of the sources presented in this article are among 400,000 books, 1.7 million photos and 12.5 million manuscripts available for study through the U.S. Army Military History Institute (MHI). The artifacts shown are among nearly 50,000 items of the Army Heritage Museum (AHM) collections. MHI and AHM are part of the Army Heritage and Education Center (AHEC), 950 Soldiers Drive, Carlisle, PA, 17013-5021.

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**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

1. What did the Disney Studios support during World War II?

- A. the Axis Powers
- B. the career of Hal Olsen
- C. the American war effort
- D. the construction of ambulances

2. What does the author describe in the article?

- A. the plots of the "Why We Fight" films created by Disney animators and Frank Capra
- B. the soldiers Walt Disney rescued while serving as a Red Cross ambulance driver
- C. the process by which the U.S. Navy designed and built "mosquito boats"
- D. the contributions that the Disney Studios made to the U.S. in World War II

3. Read these sentences from the text:

"An important factor ensuring America's ultimate victory over the Axis Powers in World War II was the overwhelming and unwavering support of the Home Front. Contributing much to creating and maintaining that Home Front support were Walt Disney films."

What evidence supports the claim that Walt Disney films helped create and maintain "Home Front support"?

- A. Disney-designed insignia appeared on planes, trucks, flight jackets, and other military equipment during World War II.
- B. Disney made a film in 1943 that pointed out the benefit of paying taxes in support of the American war effort.
- C. During World War II, the Disney Studios produced some 400,000 feet of film representing some 68 hours of continuous film.
- D. While serving as a Red Cross ambulance driver, Walt Disney embellished his ambulance and other vehicles with drawings and cartoon figures.

4. Read this paragraph from the text:

"During World War I, while serving as a Red Cross ambulance driver, Walt Disney embellished his ambulance and other vehicles with drawings and cartoon figures. Thus, he came to appreciate the importance of humorous insignia to unit morale and espritde-corps. It is not surprising, therefore, that during World War II Disney artists often used their talents to design military insignia and emblems."

Based on this information, what can you infer about the effect of the insignia and emblems designed by Disney artists during World War II?

- A. The insignia and emblems probably improved the morale and spirit of troops fighting in World War II.
- B. The insignia and emblems probably lowered the morale and spirit of troops fighting in World War II.
- C. The insignia and emblems probably had little effect on the morale and spirit of troops fighting in World War II.
- D. The insignia and emblems probably made troops fighting in World War II want to watch Disney movies.

5. What is the main idea of this text?

- A. Hal Olsen, a retired naval aviation mechanic, started his art career during World War II.
- B. The Disney Studios made important contributions to the American government and military during World War II.
- C. At the U.S. Navy's request, the Disney Studios produced some 90,000 feet of training film to educate sailors on navigation tactics.
- D. During World War II, the Disney Studios designed a winged tiger flying through a large V for victory for the world famous "Flying Tigers."

6. Read these sentences from the text:

"During World War I, while serving as a Red Cross ambulance driver, Walt Disney embellished his ambulance and other vehicles with drawings and cartoon figures. Thus, he came to appreciate the importance of humorous **insignia** to unit morale and espritde-corps. It is not surprising, therefore, that during World War II Disney artists often used their talents to design military **insignia** and emblems."

What does the word "**insignia**" probably mean here?

- A. distinguishing marks, symbols, or illustrations
- B. cartoon characters such as Donald Duck
- C. sculpture, photography, and other art forms
- D. powerful weapons and military equipment

7. Read these sentences from the text:

"It is not surprising, therefore, that during World War II Disney artists often used their talents to design military insignia and emblems.

"For example, in 1942 the Navy asked Disney to design an emblem appropriate for its new fleet of Navy torpedo boats known as 'mosquito boats.' In response, Disney provided its famous emblem of a mosquito riding a torpedo, which soon adorned all of the newly constructed PT boats."

What phrase could replace "For example" in the second sentence without changing the sentence's meaning?

- A. As a result
- B. In summary
- C. For instance
- D. On the other hand

8. At the U.S. Navy's request, the Disney Studios produced some 90,000 feet of training film. What was the purpose of this training film?

9. According to the author, what was "the importance of the Disney Studios to the war effort" perhaps best demonstrated by?

10. What was the most important contribution that the Disney Studios made to America during World War II?