

Overcast and cool, the weather suited Veterans Day's somber reflection. What I found inside the History Museum of Mobile was one of our veterans' most worthy yet horrific chapters.

On display through Jan. 16, "Filming the Camps" follows American film directors John Ford, Samuel Fuller and George Stevens in their work for the Field Photographic Branch. Along with 60 technicians, they were instructed to film war crimes and atrocities as United States forces crossed Europe following D-Day.

A warning about the graphic nature of the display is on the entrance for good reason. It is not recommended for children younger than 11. Stark lighting, charcoal gray walls and dark carpet set a fitting tone in the exhibit hall. Display cabinets of bare, unpainted wood complete the bleak ambience.

"I've always found that the quiet little man that nobody pays any attention to usually has more guts and courage than the big blowhard, the big noisy, you know, the big outspoken fellow. It's the little man that does the courageous thing," famous western director John Ford says in a 1968 interview on one of many video screens.

Next to the famous director of Westerns is Samuel Fuller, a Jewish New Yorker who went to work as a crime reporter at age 17 before joining the war effort.

"I lie with the camera, lie like hell. The people in my war scenes, they don't fall apart," Fuller says. He saw combat and would eventually be present at the liberation of the Falkenau Concentration Camp.

Exhibits show storyboards, scripting, memos, orders and instructions passed on to their corps. A note dated May 3, 1945, tells of Americans' refusal to believe the stories unless film existed to convince them. Their work became evidence in the Nuremberg war crime trials, their planning spelled out in the exhibit.

George Stevens made his directorial name with slapstick comedy and Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers musicals before joining the Army Signal Corps. In late April 1945, his film crew joined U.S. troops near Munich and the Dachau Concentration Camp. It forever changed his films.

The Nazis scrambled to cover their crimes as the Allies neared, burning documents, destroying gas chambers. Stevens' crew came across 39 railway wagons filled with 4,800 prisoners abandoned during relocation, packed into open cattle cars and most all dead of exposure in a wintry cold snap.

There are descriptions and images of the men in their "pajama-like zebra suits ... used to rob them of a remainder of their feelings of individual liberty." One prisoner had a fresh leg amputation, the wound covered with toilet paper.

The Dachau discoveries flicker on screens in the darkened hall. There's footage of wandering prisoners, walking skeletons with their "drawn yellow skin" and "pipe-like arms." Those too weak to walk were carried on sagging pallets or others' shoulders. Disease and pestilence were rampant.

Prisoners turned on the guards who tried to escape detection by donning inmates' clothes. Battle-hardened American troops overcome by the tragedy joined the assault. SS officers were killed outright.

Corpses are shown being dressed before burial "so their exit from this world would have some kind of dignity." An arm chaplain rabbi was brought in for Jewish religious services at Stevens' insistence. He naturally filmed it.

Local German citizens were made to tour the camp and the ovens where stacks of bodies awaited incineration. They disavowed any knowledge but the Americans doubted their claims, as the hellish odor extended miles into the countryside.

How do these things happen? How do humans come to this barbarism?

The answer is easy: we feed our worst selves, then don willful ignorance. Uncertainty sparks fear and we fan its flames, with pointed fingers, with scapegoats — ethnicities, religions, journalists, intellectuals, professionals — and fruitless longing for simple answers. When scared and hungry souls belong to authoritarian cultures, misdirection is facile.

Germany was in dire straits. Its citizens felt impoverished and persecuted, and their alienation demanded victimization of others.

"Surely I have the right to remove millions," Hitler said.

He built upon a tripod of militant ethnocentrism, mythic social decay and transcendent visions of national rejuvenation. The clamorous gave him power, and momentum began.

Leaving the exhibit, I again passed a bench from a local Jewish fraternal chapter founded by German Jewish immigrants after the Civil War. Three seats share arms and worn cushions belie its antiquity.

On the large headboard behind the bench is carved "benevolence, brotherly love, harmony." What felt a tragic irony on the way in seemed a resilient hope on the way out and a mournful prayer for our future.