Two Melodramas: THE LOST SQUADRON (1932)  
THE DOOMED BATTALION (1931)

"THE DOOMED BATTALION" (Universal, 1931; rel. 1932) Dir; Cyril Gardner;  
written by Luis Trenker; scenario by Luis Trenker, Carl  
Hartl, Paul Perez; photographed by Charles Stumar; with Luis Trenker,  
Tala Birell, Victor Varconi, Albert Conti, Gustave von Seyffardt,  
Gibson Gowland, C. Henry Gordon, Herman Bing, Henry Armetta, 6 reels.

Following the enormous and largely unexpected success of "The White  
Hell of Pitz Palu", Universal, under the leadership of Carl Laemmle  
who had strong Germanic leanings anyway, launched into a whole series  
of multi-lingual co-productions which can be loosely termed "mountain"  
films, although without the semi-mystic and symbolic qualities that  
marked the German originals. "SOS Iceberg", "The Doomed Battalion" and  
"The Rebel" were all substantial money-makers on their first release,  
and in addition provided stock footage for "E" pictures and serials for  
many years to come. (The foreign version of "The Doomed Battalion" was  
etitled "Berge in Flammen" and also starred Trenker, but with Lissy  
Arna and Luigi Serventini in the roles now played by Tala Birell and  
Victor Varconi.) All of these films were vigorous adventure yarns, done  
so realistically in picturesque locations that the few studio effects  
(the phoney iceberg in "SOS Iceberg", the phoney mountain for certain  
long shots here) really stood out like a sore thumb, despite being  
capably done.

"The Doomed Battalion" has less action than others in the group, and a  
slightly more sober plot-line. (It resembles some of the better Russian  
fictional war adventures of the 40's -- as for example, "In the Rear  
of the Enemy"). What plot there is is Trenker's favorite old theme -- the  
two friends from opposite sides meet for the first time on a mountain,  
are united by their "understanding" of the mountain -- are split up by  
events that make them temporary enemies -- and are then reunited once  
more on their beloved mountain. Trenker had used this basic theme before,  
and he used it again in Korda's "The Challenge" (1939), co-directed by  
Trenker, and dealing with the conquest of the Matterhorn. The theme of  
the "doomed" troop is an old favorite in war films too -- remember "The  
Road to Glory"? But originality is of less importance here than verve  
and style. Pictorially it is all quite splendid, and the one big ski  
sequence, which appears half-way through the film, is magnificently  
photographed and edited.

The print is an original, not a recent tv one, so it is a little worn in  
spots, and the sound quality leaves a little to be desired. However, it  
is complete, and if a few words of dialogue are missed, it shouldn't  
affect one's liking (or disliking) the film in any way.

- Intermission -

"THE LOST SQUADRON" (Rko Radio, 1932) Dir; George Archainbaud; story by  
Dick Grace; scenario, Wallace Smith; dialogue, Wallace  
Smith and Herman Mankiewicz; cameramen, Leo Tovar, Edward Cronjager;  
aerial photography by Rob Ribson, Elmer Dyer; with Richard Dix, Mary  
Astor, Erich von Stroheim, Joel McCrea, Robert Armstrong, Dorothy Jordan,  
Hugh Herbert, Ralph Ince, Arnold Grey, Dick Grace, Art Goebel, Frank  
Clark, Leo Nomia. 9 reels.

Ralph Lewis, Jr. B. Davidson.

In the early 30's, Rko had Richard Dix and Columbia had Jack Holt -- so
these stalwarts could always be depended upon for a couple of good old-time air pictures each year. But in the wake of HELL'S ANGELS, THE DAWN PATROL and others, there were signs that the public was becoming a little bored with the cycle; no matter how expertly the films were made. (And they were expertly turned out: take a look at Wellman's recent "Lafayette Escadrille" compare it with a Dix programmer like "Ace of Aces", and note the difference?) In order to stress that it wasn't like all the others, THE LOST SQUADRON advertised itself as "NOT an Air Film ... NOT a War Film!" Actually it was both of these to a degree, although the war footage is limited to one of those gallant, gentlemanly aerial duels, in the opening sequence of the picture. It's a depression era movie and shows it -- but most of all it's a wonderfully enjoyable piece of hokum about Hollywood. Stroheim, in a not too exaggerated caricature of himself, gives a wonderful performance -- though one can't really imagine the real Stroheim shooting a whole aerial battle from the ground. Detail may be wholly unconvincing -- but the overall picture is far more convincing than in most movies about Hollywood.

The aerial stunts and crashes of course are all highlights, and are the work of Dick Grace. For all his unquestioned skill and daring, Grace, in his book "Squadron of Death", gives the impression of being both an egotist and a blowhard. Certainly one can't take him too seriously when he describes, in great detail, how he staged the crash into the sea in this picture -- when said crash turns out to be a particularly neat piece of technical trickery!"

The cast is full of reliable old friends from the 20's and 30's -- and if the dialogue gets a shade too sentimental once in a while (every third line seems to refer to somebody or other, usually Dix, being "a swell guy") ... well, that was very much a part of the 30's too. Directed George Archainbaud was a curious fellow, who'd made some extremely interesting silents for Selznick and Chadwick back in the 20's, and wound up making particularly slick and vigorous westerns in the 40's. He always seemed worthy of better things -- yet, even on the program level, never turned out a really fine film. This is certainly one of his better efforts, though it has some weak spots. The film boggs down badly in its closing reels -- the whole section of the police interrogation is far too slowly paced and badly acted -- and certainly some of the blame for this must be shouldered by Archainbaud. However, it picks up again for the finale, a mixture of melodrama and good old-fashioned sentiment, plus a sticky end for Von Stroheim that isn't too far removed from his demise in "Foolish Wives".

The print is brand new, in excellent condition, and complete. (For some reason, most 1932 sources list the film as only 72 minutes -- but it runs more than a reel in excess of that). However, this -- and all other prints of the film that I've seen -- have one very strange defect. On every single change of camera set-up -- sometimes two or three in a minute -- you'll notice a slight pop on the sound track -- not enough to be annoying, but enough so that one is aware of it. It would seem that when the original negative was spliced together, someone clean forgot to bloop out all the splices! Presumably when it was discovered, the culprit must have been run out of Hollywood on a rail -- it's an incredible thing to have happen to any film, but more incredible still is that nobody seems to have noticed it until it was too late!