"WINGS" (Paramount, 1927) Directed by William A. Wellman
Produced by Lucien Hubbard; Screenplay by Hope Loring and Louis D. Lighton from a story by John Monk Saunders; editor, E. Lloyd Sheldon; cameramen include Al Williams, Faron Deans, Ernest Marlan, William Clother and Ernest Laszlo; Special Effects, Ray Pomeroy; Associate Producer, B.P. Schulberg; titles by Julian Johnson; 13 reels

Justly famous as the first Academy Award winner, and as the film which launched the big aviation cycle that included "The Idle Hour," "Hell's Angels" and "The Dawn Patrol," "Wings" more than lived up to its reputation in some respects, compared with others. As a war film, it is clearly inferior to "The Big Parade." Vidor's film carefully re-established the old, uncomprehending, jingoistic attitude to war that had existed at the time of America's entry into World War One, and then proceeded - given the limited perspective of that time - to condemn it. "Wings" equally carefully recreates that jingoistic frame of mind, and sustains it as an acceptable attitude - although admittedly, Wellman and Saunders as former wartime fliers can be forgiven for having wanted to glorify that one aspect of the war that they were familiar with. The occasional "war-is-hell" statements creep in as a sort of cliche, not as a passionate conviction. Moreover, there is much, is true, full of coincidence, contrivance, and an ancient triangle situation. However, World War One is now so far away from us that films dealing with it fall more into the "historical spectacle" category than real war films deal with it fall more into the "historical spectacle" category than real war. "Wings" is a grand show. It devotes most of its footage to aerial combat material, and it is all stunningly done. The crashes, staged by Dick Grace, are the real thing - not photomechanical fakes that "Lilac Time" came up with by dropping a plane from a crane. The actors, devoid of back projection, are thrilling and look real, though they are devoid of the cunning choreography that made the "Hell's Angels" battles even more exciting, and they do projection from the lack of sound effects, so important a part of this kind of thrill sequence. Superfluous subtitles intrude into the aerial scenes too often as well, constantly taking us out of the reality of it all to remind us that this is just a movie. Yet wthin, they still work beautifully - much better for the most than the long and elaborate aerial sequences in the current "Darling Lili," which are superbly photographed, have color and sound, and yet somehow and intangibly look constantly like an attempt to recreate the air-war movie rather than the air-war itself.

Paramount, noted for their cheapness in the 20's, for once went whole-hog on this movie. Production values are outstanding. They obviously sent a unit to Paris to shoot the airmen-on-leave sequence, and the Paris cameramen and this may have been a disappointment as well. The only real sign of economy said device - was the "painting in" of the flames on the crashing planes. In the original 35mm prints, these were hand-painted and actually looked more artificial than in this black-and-white print. The film was Wellman's first really big directorial assignment, and he was perhaps over-anxious to impress with his pictorial style. There's just too much of it, and while it's lively, it's undisciplined - from the tricky shots in the swing at the beginning to the over-use of the moving camera. Each sequence has beautifully framed and composed shots, and one has the impression that locking at perfectly balanced pictures that the striking compositions in the final battle scenes are minimized by mere effects. Planes taking off are shot from above, and the pilots in their cockpit shot from all angles, so that one loses the simplicity and ready identification that "Hell's Angels" provided. One never becomes too involved with the personalities here, and is always aware of watching a giant movie "show" from a vantage point. However, Wellman's keen showy moments pay off well; Gary Cooper's underplayed death scene is extremely affecting, a cliche now perhaps but not then; while the simple symbolic backdrop of the "landing" of the old 1918 Air Mail planes that Attenborough may have seen this and used (and admittedly, improved on) the device for his "Oh, What a Lovely War." The sentiment is sometimes a little hard to take, though only because the characters themselves (especially Paddy Rogers) seem so trival; Wellman seems to realize this, and deliberately cuts away from the shot of Arlen kissing Rogers goodbye near the end; a sequence that could have been intensely moving, but obviously wouldn't have been in the rather superficial atmosphere of this movie. Arlen is particularly good incidentally, and Gary Cooper as winning, viracious as ever, even getting into aança low-cut Parisian outfit at one point in a sequence dragged in by the haels to keep her jazz-age fans happy!

W. K. Brooks