November 23, 1970

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

**TWO BRITISH WARTIME SEMI-DOCUMENTARY TREATIES**


Initially designed as a very rough training film for British troops, then reshaped for theatrical release because of its propagandist values, "Next of Kin" was then sent to this country where it was further changed to fit US troop training needs, while a fourth version curiously was put out theatrically by Universal. Thorold Dickinson repudiates all but the original version, and in fact when we last played the film (in August of 1960) he fervently asked us not to.

Our version is the U.S. Army one, far more complete than the US release version, which deleted much of the raw dialogue and casual references to drug addiction. Dickson was unhappy with all of the US release editions, calling it a complete travesty of the original. This Army version, he says, was edited by a Selznick Studios editor who wasn't worried about censorship, but tried to trim the film to its three reels. But the impression that this edited version would be too grim for American troops, as yet unversed in warfare, and in addition would lower their respect for the apparently fifth-column ridden British people. The film's initial English release was held up because of a forthcoming Commando raid, the film's defeatist approach being considered bad for morale. Then, when the raid was a success, Winston Churchill felt that the film would be easier to take and more of a propagandist tool if Dickinson would insert "more dead Germans." This was done, but now the War Department was unhappy, feeling that the somber message they wanted to ram home had been weakened. More changes - and when the decision was made to release it theatrically, none of the exceptionally gruesome scenes, though totalling only about 20 seconds, were taken out. However, other than stating that "the guts were removed" and "climax shortened," Dickinson was never very specific about these deletions, and one bears in mind that he has had singularly bad luck with his films at the hands of American editors - "The Secret People" in particular - so his chagrin about this particular film may well have been colored by other later experiences. It was hardly a popular film in England, since memories of the Dieppe raid (military a "success", but propaganda a "failure") still linger. Not only the memories of families personally affected, but it was a grim reminder that the time of the invasion was still a long way off. (At the time, many assumed that the raid was actually the start of the invasion). Yet, for all its tampering, "Next of Kin" remains a grim and powerful film, and at the same time a rather entertaining one, with touches of comedy that have more than a casual affinity to Hitchcock. Since everybody fears dentists, it was a sly touch to make one of the German agents a dentist - just as Hitchcock had done in "The Man Who Knew Too Much." And as in "The Lady Vanishes," though for different and more serious reasons, the Number One spy escapes unscathed at the end.

"NINE MEN" (Kaling, 1943) Written and directed by Harry Watt; produced by Michael Balcon; from a story by Gerald Kersh; Music by John Greenwood; Camera, Roy Kelino; Production Supervisor, John Croydon; Associate Producer, Charles Crichton; Working title: "Deputy Doc"; 7 reels. With Jack Lambert, Gordon Jackson, Frederick Piper, Grant Sutherland, Bill BLEWETT, Eric Micklewood, John warley, Jack Horsem, Richard Wilkinson.

"Nine Men" - with its roots in such films as "The Thirteen" and "The Lost Patrol," and itself somewhat of a blueprint for Carol Reed's "The Way Ahead" - was documentary Harry Watt's first full-length feature. Although some of the players later became quite well known, they were all new faces then, lending the film a more thoroughly documentary flavor - and indeed, the best of Watt's later features ("The Overlanders" etc.) remained essentially documentaries in style and subject matter; "Nine Men" rather took audiences by surprise in 1943; used to amuse small droll British comedians it documented, managing war humor and real excitement in its lively hand-to-hand combat scenes. (This was before the Hollywood war films like "Gung Ho" had brought savage stuntman expertise to battle scenes). In a purely documentary sense; the early training scenes are perhaps the best, being astonishingly "right" in detail, and also establishing a very real and convincing picture of the wartime relationship and respect between sergeant and platoon. Even the melancholy sadness of a parade ground in a rain-soaked dusk scene perfectly captured - but since British parade grounds always seemed to look like that, perhaps that was the least of Watt's feats!

-- W.R. Everson --