An evening of claustrophobia with the submarines

"SUBMARINE D-1" (Warner Brothers, 1937) Directed by Lloyd Bacon

Screenplay by Frank Wead, Warren Duff and Lawrence Kimble from an original story by Frank Wead; Camera, Arthur Edeson; Music, Max Steiner; Art Director, Edras Hartley; 9 reels


Many of the service pictures made with such proliferation in the 30's by Warners and MGM tend to date somewhat today, not only because their framework plots (usually written by Frank Wead, the subject of a John Ford-John Wayne biography in "Wings of Eagles") overlap, but also because the semi-documentary technology that they present seems so old-fashioned today. At the time however, this kind of footage was of tremendous interest, and MGM's "Hell Divers" even had to go so far as to crop off the bottom of the screen in some shots because the footage gave away too many details of aircraft-carrying landing procedure. "Submarine D-1", since it is not one of the Gagney-O'Brien frolics, is a little more sober than many of the Warner service pictures, though it has its fair share of cliches. As soon as one meets the happy young newly-joined in reel one, the husband, just off on one last "routine" mission, one knows that he is not long for this world! Nevertheless, it's an entertaining and slickly turned out picture, with the Warner stock company performing as expected, Arthur Edeson providing his usual top-flight photography, and all of the naval footage still quite fascinating and another reminder of the old-style Hollywood progress reel, has been made in a few years although it is admittedly less pronounced in the service area of submarines (atomic power apart, there doesn't seem to have been any radical change in design) than in aircraft.

"WE DIVE AT DAWN" (Gainsborough-British, 1943) Directed by Anthony Asquith

Produced by Edward Black; Screenplay, J.B. Williams and Val Valentine; Photography, Jack Cox; Music, Louis Levy; 9 reels


With the single exception of 1944's "Paddy By Gaslight", a period melodrama, all of Anthony Asquith's 1940-1947 films were war-oriented, though they ran a large gamut from comedy and straight documentary to straightforward resistance literature. And of the two, unquestionably the best of the latter was "We Dive at Dawn", a film which, although it was less than "We Dive at Dawn" was certainly the least theatrical and the one that most successfully absorbed documentary techniques. It was also the only one of his wartime films that seemed, deliberately, to recapture the style and manner of his early talkie success "Tell England", which likewise mixed documentary with occasional staginess, and utilized characters that reflected a good deal of class consciousness. However, this latter was an almost unavoidable ingredient of any British war time film. Just as the deliberate exploitation of class consciousness was stressed at Warners too, the民主ism of "We Dive at Dawn" was an invasion of privacy that no British enlisted man would ever have tolerated! In any case, the extremes and varieties of "class" in England are so pronounced that some maintenance of the system is inevitable and even desirable. If the playing fields of Eton are ever levelled to meet the Grammar School at Bermondsey, not only will the Empire be in serious trouble, but it'll be an end to such works as Noel Coward's "Cavalcade".

There are however, some interesting castings against type like the Dive at Dawn - Mills and Porter, rare in the democratic bob-nobbing between Alan Hale, Dan O'Herlihy - an invasion of privacy that no British enlisted man would ever have tolerated! In any case, the extremes and varieties of "class" in England are so pronounced that some maintenance of the system is inevitable and even desirable. If the playing fields of Eton are ever levelled to meet the Grammar School at Bermondsey, not only will the Empire be in serious trouble, but it'll be an end to such works as Noel Coward's "Cavalcade".

There are however, some interesting castings against type like the Dive at Dawn - Mills and Porter, rare in the democratic bob-nobbing between Alan Hale, Dan O'Herlihy - an invasion of privacy that no British enlisted man would ever have tolerated! In any case, the extremes and varieties of "class" in England are so pronounced that some maintenance of the system is inevitable and even desirable. If the playing fields of Eton are ever levelled to meet the Grammar School at Bermondsey, not only will the Empire be in serious trouble, but it'll be an end to such works as Noel Coward's "Cavalcade".

The only major flaw in the film is that the portions of really sustained dramatic interest occur in the middle; the climax is exciting enough and well-staged, but it is the typical wartime wrap-up of films like "Crush Dive", and to a degree lowers the integrity of an otherwise quite fine film. For the rest however, the film is polished, realistic, and effectively under-stated. Most of the earlier British war films, and especially those from Ealing, tended to be too studio-bound and too prone to rely on a mixture of newreel footage and "We Dive at Dawn" is hardly an action-movie, and keeps some of its highlights off-screen, it is still a thoroughly professional job, and much more convincing than such films as "Ships With Wings", "The Day Will Dawn" and Asquith's own "Uncensored".

---William K. Everson---