"Freedom Comes High" (U.S.Navy-Paramount, 1943) Directed by Lewis Allen Camera: Stuart Thompson; one reel
With James Craig, Barbara Britton, Donald Cook, Cecil Kellaway, Nabel Paige, Charles Quigley.

Although made as a Navy propagandist film (for theatrical distribution), this one-reeler has a typical Paramount "B" look, complete to infallible type-casting and photographic style. Barbara Britton makes the first of her two appearances tonight as the typical (?) "girl back home", and the film is a further reinforcement of that curious wartime movie phenomenon of both soft-peddling and romanticising death. In Hollywood features ("A Guy Named Joe"), in Hollywood-produced propagandist shorts (like tonight's two films, "A Letter from Bataan" and others) and in Army training films ("Men of Steel") the dead have a disconcerting habit of returning in spirit form to comfort and more important stimulate the war-effort activity of the living. While the war in Britain did result in a slightly morbid casual acceptance of death and the production of a series of serious ghost stories ("Thunder Rock", "Halfway House", "Dead of Night" etc.) it didn't result in this unreal "Our Town" kind of idealisation of death, and one wonders whether in the U.S. these films did have the intended effect on bereaved families.

"The Last Will and Testament of Tom Smith" (MG/M/Paramount, 1943) Directed by Harold S. Bucquet; Associate Producer, Richard Blumenthal; screenplay by Stephen Longstreet; Camera, Theodor Sparkuhl; Art Direction, Hans Dreier and Roland Anderson; Music, Gordon Jenkins; one reel
With George Reeves, Lionel Barrymore, Barbara Britton, Walter Brennan, Walter Abel, Fred MacMurray.

The parentage of this film is rather curiously split, although the folkly footage with Lionel Barrymore and Walter Brennan suggests the omnipresence of Louis B., and a quick stock shot from an old Kildare movie also indicates that MGM was the home base, despite the roster of Paramount names involved. Unlike the British propagandist documentary films, which spent more time showing the populace how to win than urging them to hate the enemy, this short operates on a revenge motif pure and simple, winding up with the warning that the Japs are going to be burned off the face of the earth! (The closest the British came to such emotion was Churchill's call to arms at the end of "Words for Battle" --- "Onward, Britannia! God Save the King"!)

"Report on German Morale" (Army Pictorial Service for the Office of Strategic Services, 1944); no credits available; two reels.

Designed purely for armed forces consumption only, this is an unusually interesting documentary, not only for its extensive use of unfamiliar captured enemy footage (including a wartime Nazi newsreel) but also for its attitudes. Among other things it rather gleefully siezes upon German civilian misery as a propagandist weapon to be exploited --- the very same tactics that were deplored in Capra's earlier "Why We Fight" series as examples of Nazi inhumanity. Obviously any means of shortening a war have to be followed up, and this about-face is interesting mainly as an illustration of how America entered the war somewhat naively and idealistically, and soon found that the best means of combating Fascism were by copying at least some of the methods of Fascism, a point also brought home in Kevin Brownlow's "It Happened Here".

-- intermission --

"THE WAY AHEAD" (Eagle-Lion (Rank) - Two Cities, 1944) (U.S. release by 20th Century Fox in 1945 in severely edited form; later retitled "The Immortal Battalion". Directed by Carol Reed; Produced by Norman Walker and John Sutro; Associate Producer, Stanley Haynes; Original story by Eric Ambler, screenplay by Ambler and Peter Ustinov; Camera, Guy Green; Music by William Alwyn, Musical Direction, Muir Mathieson; Art Direction, David Rawnsley, Arthur Lawson; edited by Burgess McDonnell; 11 reels.


(Continued on p.2)
Apart from the documentary "The True Glory", "The Way Ahead" was Reed's only feature between "The Young Mr. Pitt" (1942) and "Odd Man Out" (1947). It came at a period when Britain was soft-peddling the hard-sell combat war films, leaving them more and more to the expertise of Hollywood, and concentrating instead on the quieter dramas and less aggressively war-oriented films - "Waterloo Road", and the films like "A Canterbury Tale" and "The Wann Pypt" that stressed rural charm, and if they were propagandist at all, emphasised the national qualities and characteristics that the war was being fought to protect. It was also a period in which the British film had almost totally absorbed documentary methods; "The Way Ahead" derived from both Harry Watt's "Nine Men" and Reed's own army training film "The New Lot"; never was a virtual documentary (Niven was the only concession to a boxoffice name, and he was such an asset that the word concession is hardly appropriate) such a huge commercial success.

In England, "The Way Ahead" was a huge critical success, and an enormous commercial hit too - possibly the biggest of the war. It raised Niven's stock to such unprecedented heights that had he been free (he was then in the forces) to cash in on his success, he might have followed his momentum to real super-stardom. Instead, reissues of 2nd-rate Niven films ("Eternally Yours") minimised his impact, and when he was free to return to his career, the opportunity had been lost. The incredible success of "The Way Ahead", fine film though it still is, is perhaps a little hard to understand today, but in 1944 (it was released coincidentally, and fortuitously, with the launching of the European invasion) it was a case of the right film coming at exactly the right time. The British were tiring of a long war, and especially fed up were the draftees - not least because British Army modus operandi was (and probably still is) old-fashioned, full of traditional spit-and-polish (did the American equivalent? Did we see any film of coal polisher?) and much time-wasting. Here was a film which was a totally accurate picture of British army life, presented recognisable grapples with warth and good humor, and somehow made it seem all worth-while and to a positive end. Even the collection of "types" managed to avoid cliche, and there couldn't have been a man in the army then (or among the draftees of the post-war army) who couldn't readily identify with at least one of them. (My own identification was rather spectacularly with Raymond Huntley ... at least in his treatment of me, I have never been able to duplicate his genuine efficiency, perhaps because I never had an officer like David Niven to inspire me!) "The Way Ahead" concentrates on the reluctant inductees, pulled into the army fairly late (by virtue of age, or finally crumbling deferments) and is incredibly accurate in detailing their resentments, and the gradual building of camaraderie and officer-enlisted men respect. The NCO types are magnificently drawn - Billy Hartnell is not only the "definitive" British army sergeant, but he also became the stock movie sergeant thereafter. Officers of the calibre of David Niven were unfortunately less common-place - but after the film's release, many officers consciously tried to emulate him (even to the growing of small moustaches) and even if they didn't have the plan to carry it off, at least the attempt was an improvement.

So realistic is the film's documentarian style and understated humor that the first big action sequence - a fire aboard a troopship - despite being a studio-made sequence seems to carry all the authenticity of a newsreel, while the later and climactic battle scenes, while more conventional, likewise carry with the ambiguous ending. Its downbeat quality - if indeed it is that - hardly matters at all, since one now accepts these men as a unit and not as individuals. But it is suggested that their courage and sacrifice is enabled not because is helping to win the war, but because it is maintaining the old-fashioned traditions of glory and honor exemplified by the aged Chelsea Pensioners, who really have no concept of modern war - or the reasons for it - at all.

Apart from being a funny and exciting movie, and a beautifully acted one (James Donald's portrait of the malcontent who ruins the training exercise is particularly subtle) "The Way Ahead" also represents a crossralling of absolute top creative talent, ranging from major-talents-to-be (Ustinov, McDonell) to well established but often wasted existing talents, such as Norman Walker (director of the lyrical "Turn of the Tide" in 1935). Much of "The Way Ahead"'s real success was with his country, where it was deplorably shortened (the earlier sections being the key casualties) and fitted out with an absurd "Gung Ho" narration by Quentin Reynolds. Tonight's print, fortunately, is of the full, uncut version.

Monday next, April 30: UNTAMED (1920, dir: Emmett Flynn with Tom Mix) and GOING CROOKED (1926, dir: George Melford, with Bessie Love, Gustav von Seyffertitz, Leslie Fenton.

A reminder: The May 28 (DeMille's WHISPERING CHORUS) program will probably have to be re-scheduled due to that date being a public holiday. Details on the May 21 program notes - or drop me a postcard at 118 W.79, NYC 24.