"HELL DIVERS" ( MGM, 1931) Directed by George Hill  
Scenario by Harvey Gates, Malcolm Stuart Boylan, from an original story by Lt. Commander Frank Vedd; Camera, Harold Wenstrom; edited by Blanche Sewell; 11 reels  
With Wallace Beery, Clark Gable, Conrad Nagel, Dorothy Jordan, Harjorie Hanneke, John Miljan, Marie Prevost, Cliff Edwards, Reed Howes, Lander Stevens, Alistair Cooke, Jock Pemnick, Frank Conroy, Robert Young, Buddy Roosevelt, Miles Welsh, Pat O'Brien, Julian Rivero.

"Wings" in 1927 launched a whole new cycle of aviation epics which, initially, in late silents and early talkies like "Hell's Angels", "Li'lac Time", "The Eagle and the Hawk" and "The Age of Aeons", concentrated on World War One themes. In the very early 30's the emphasis began to veer more in the direction of Naval and Air Force exploration ("Dirigibles") and civil pioneering ("Air Mail", "Central Airport"). From the mid-30's on, the emphasis changed again - this time to themes of technological progress, both civil ("Test Pilot", "Flying Zero") and military ("Wings of the Navy", "Men With Wings", "I Wanted Wings") - by which time we were up to World War Two, and the wartime stories ("International Squadron", "Eagle Squadron", "Dive Bomber", "Air Force", "Captains of the Clouds") took over again -- some of them incidentally, jazzed-up remakes of earlier films. (For example, "International Squadron" was a careful re-shuffling of "Flying Zero").

In the first few years of all this activity, two scenarios in particular dominated the scene; most of the "World War One" stories seemed to have been written (as was last week's "The Last Flight") by John Monk Saunders, while most of the civil aviation and service stories came from the prolific pen of Frank Vedd. A former Naval man himself, Vedd was portrayed by John Wayne in an interesting biography, "Wings of Eagles", directed by John Ford - and which incidentally included a clip from tonight's film "Hell Divers".

"Hell Divers" is an elaborate, masculine film, typical of the kind of no-nonsense script that Vedd turned out with such regularity, and typical too of the vigorous, he-man films directed by George Hill ("The Big House", "The Secret Six"). It's corny at times, hacky if you will, yet even today, when this kind of film has been imitated so often, it is surprisingly free of cliche. Apart from the traditional misunderstanding between the two rugged heroes, there is little of the mutual double-crossing that, for example, consumed so much footage in the Cagney-O'Brien films like "Devil Dogs of the Air" and "Here Comes the Navy". There's practically no time wasted on romance, with the women dispensed with very quickly, and one notes with relief the total absence of such stock characters as the scared kid who overcomes his fear of heights or the pregnant wife who wants her husband to retire - pregnancies of course always being the basis of death for aviator-husbands in movies of the 30's and 40's. Most of the time it stays in the air, and gives one a little back projection and some miniatures, it's the real stuff, and fascinating footage. Apparently some shots gave away a little too much of the details of landing techniques aboard aircraft carriers, and on these occasions the bottom of the screen has been optically blacked out. As with all of these aviation films of the 30's, one is constantly reminded of how incredibly rapidly new techniques advanced; compared with today's jets and rockets, the planes of the 30's have already acquired the kind of age we now afford the grizzled old sailing ship. One of the best films of its kind - in its period - "Hell Divers" does suffer a bit from rather lack-lustre dialogue. The sentiment is nicely underplayed, the service jargon realistic enough, some of the dialogue incidentally the work of Ralph Graves, who starred in some of Frank Capra's aviation films, and co-wrote his "Flight". But one does miss the raw, gutsy pace that one would have found in the dialogue had this been a Warner Brothers picture - the kind of dialogue that Vedd came up with for Pat O'Brien in "Air Mail", made by John Ford at Universal. But when Louis B. Mayer made a patriotic American tribute, it had to be a tribute all the way, with non-sensicreacking and thoroughly moral servicism: that the nation could be proud of!

Preceding "Hell Divers" will be "Lighter than Air", Robert Youngson's well-constructed documentary on the dirigible era.

--- William K. Everson ---