The relative success of John Schlesinger's "Yanks" last year (a critical success not matched at the boxoffice unfortunately) prompts us to go back and look at two films - one American, one British - which dealt with the same theme at the time. "Yanks" is a very fine film, but despite the care with which its milieu was recreated, errors of fact and behaviour crop in. In all fairness, the original film had errors too, though mainly errors of omission caused by propagandist considerations, or censorship rulings at the time. Some of the mistakes in "Yanks" were actually planted there, although one of them a British and film-history conscious director like Schlesinger should certainly have avoided. When the troops go to the local movie house to see Grable's "Song of the Islands", the lobby is fastened with lovely glossy 320 stills. Glossies were not used in wartime Britain, non-sensitized paper being used instead.

20th Century Fox's were the worst of the lot, being printed on a kind of cardboard - and the color cardboard stills for "Song of the Islands" represented one of the most nauseous side effects of the entire war! Far more serious in "Yanks" were attitudes seen through the eyes of the 50's. The racial fracas depicted in "Yanks" were used been a rare event indeed, the British, somewhat smug about their own lack of racial problems, tended to go out of their way to display some "impartiality" over the American soldiers, partly out of a desire to show sincere good will, but also partly to display their superiority over the White Americans, who at first were not too popular. And the White Americans in turn, tended to perhaps over-compensate, their own inter-racial friendships in order to counterbalance the British attitude. Further, the extended use of four-letter words was extremely rare, and I can well remember occasions of shocked silence and subsequent social ostracism when the words hatched about so freely in "Yanks" were used even once and in not particularly prudish society. Even in the British army barracks, where smut was a fairly constant factor in conversation, use of the four-letter explosive was generally reserved for very special occasions, then its employment had some kind of shock value thus was brought from the books of the 70's interpretations of 40's mannerisms and mores. "A Yank in the RAF" is Hollywood trying to pay tribute to the British and thus somewhat romanticising, while "The Way to the Stars" tends to idealise the immediate past, but in an underplayed manner. The truth lies somewhere in between, with "The Way to the Stars" probably coming closest to hitting the mark.

A YANK IN THE RAF (20th Century Fox, 1942) Directed by Henry King; Produced by Darryl F. Zanuck; Associate Producer, Lou Eshelman; Original story, Melville Crossman (Zanuck); Screenplay by Darrell Backer, Karl Tunberg; Camera, Leon Shamroy; Art Directors, Richard Day, James Basevi; Special effects, Fred Jorgen; Music and lyrics, Leo Robin, Ralph Rainger; 80 mins.

With Tyrone Power, Betty Grable, John Sutton, Reginald Gardiner, Donald Stuart, Richard Fraser, Dennis Green, Bruce Lester, Lester Mathews, Frederick Worlock, Claude Allister, Echal Grifflies, Ralph Byrd, Portunio Bonavista, Gilchrist Stuart, Hans Schum

"A Yank in the RAF" was the first really big Hollywood war film, and it was a huge success both critically and at the boxoffice. Henry King was Fox's key director then, a parallel figure to Michael Curtiz at Warners. John Ford might get the artistic prestige plums, but King usually collected the properties that were considered to combine both prestige and boxoffice blockbuster interests. And Grable beautifully on this one. Hollywood reluctance to get into too many big war films was occasioned by America's official neutrality, but of course all that changed with Pearl Harbour, shortly after the release of "A Yank in the RAF," while it has many cliches today, and the romantic by-play seems trivial indeed in view of the background of total war, it was fresh and appealing at the time, and the British found it not only tremendously entertaining and appreciated the tribute, but also found it a pleasant change from their home-produced and far less showy-like war films. The character played by Tyrone Power soon became a rather irrepressible cliché in this kind of film - Ronald Reagan played virtually the same role in "International Squadron" (released about two months later, and a cunningly reshaped remake of "Culling Zero"). John Carroll did the role in "Flying Tigers", Robert Stack in "Eagle Squadron", and so forth. But here the role was still relatively new, and played with likeable dash by Power. The film was pleasingly free of propagandist speech-making, and remained an entertainment first and foremost. Grable, apart from giving a good performance, got to use her legs to advantage in two numbers, and if the supporting cast was rather full of aristocratic British types, at least we were spared the dukes and baronets that seemed to infest so many later similar films as "typical British nobility. Its details of London in wartime were surprisingly accurate too, shown of all the hollers that one found in "Men of Two Worlds" and "Wings in the Night" and "Man Shant." The action sequences were slammed over with real style, and were an excellent mixture of stunt sequences and well-created special effects. The Dunkirk sequence, with more credit to the art directors than the near-silent libraries, is quite brilliantly created, and several shots from it later turned up in documentaries, obviously accepted as the real thing. The whole film is good fun, good film-making, and a useful time-capsule record of wartime attitudes.
Terrence Rattigan, himself an RAF officer during the war, became Britain's wartime chronicler, not in a historic sense but in a dramatic one, recording its moods in plays and film scripts that ranged from emotional drama to light-hearted comedy. In many ways his "The Way to the Stars" is the definitive "Battle of Britain" film. Its three interwoven love stories cover virtually all aspects of the war as it affected servicemen and the women they loved. There is no combat action at all, although it is spoken of, and virtually no physical action other than for a brief bombing raid and a plane crash.

The film was a fantastic success at the British boxoffice, and it was in distribution, and then reissued, for a long time. Both critics and public loved it, and there are several reasons for its success. For one thing, British films were then at the height of a new-found prestige, and this, one of the biggest, was bolstered by an imposing star roster. Too, its mood caught audiences at just the right time, such as did "Brief Encounter". With war just at an end, "The Way to the Stars"'s prewar patriotism, underplayed sacrifice and cameraderie when such predramas were no longer necessary to win the war, but were good qualities to hang on to. Unfortunately, that didn't happen. Although nobody would admit it, the film enabled the British to pat themselves discreetly on the back and say "Yes, that's how we behaved, and that's why we won". And finally the spirit of Anglo-U.S. friendship was then at an all-time high. The grim post-war heritage of pizza restaurants and hot-log emporiums had only just begun to disillusion Leicester Square, and it was more fashionable to like the Americans than to like one's fellow Englishmen. Admittedly, one saw some pretty horrendous specimens stalking the London streets, but the average Britisher donned his rosy-colored spectacles (which he much needed in the austere post-war years) and forced himself to the dubious supposition that there might be an odd Englishman or two behaving strangely in New York streets at that very moment.

No, the average Britisher's impression of the average American was not the brace under which one saw in the streets, but the open and generous young man that one took home for a Sunday dinner. Romanticised or not, this impression was probably a reasonably accurate one, reinforced by such movies as this one and Douglas Montgomery's performance in it, or Michael Powell's superb "A Canterbury Tale" with its American sergeant played by John Sweet. In any event, the film neatly confirmed the idea that there were more nice Americans than loudmouths (like Bonner Cole). It seems, too, that spent the entire war playing such roles, and later did the Bernd role on the London stage's "A Streetcar Named Desire". It did, to the film's credit, not rest on overly sentimental, and one British critic tended to review the poster for "Best Years" rather than the film, referring to it as "a monumental tribute to American dentistry".

Because so many years have gone by and times and tempers have changed, "The Way to the Stars" no longer exerts quite the same appeal today. Some bits of business now seem just a shade too contrived, the characters a trifle too "typical". Such things irk not because they don't pay off, but because we know they were put there because they were guaranteed to pay off. But on the whole, to sensitive writers and fine performances - and not least to one of those typically pseudo-classical scores that British composers love so well - the film does retain much of its dramatic and emotional value. It's still a fine film, and the opening was good enough for director Henry King to lift in toto for the opening of his "Twelve O'Clock High".

Anthony Asquith was a fine British director with a particular talent for handling material from the stage, yet with such a sure knowledge of film techniques that a deft piece of editing here or a camera movement there could transform such material into film and not just filmed theatre. "The Way to the Stars", undoubtedly because of Rattigan's own primary theatre background, could very easily have become a series of static dialogue encounters. But it never does, even though it maintains a solid sense of theatre, with well-controlled comedy used for punctuation at just the right time, and the manipulation of an omnious character (well played by Joyce Carey) that everyone in the film (and the audience) has cause to dislike intensely, and who receives a rousing consequence between tragic climax and happy ending.

What makes the film work most however is its truth. Its restraint is genuine, and not merely played for effect. The attitudes and moods of wartime Britain are caught with unfailing accuracy, and if they seem a little idealised today, it is only because (very sadly) similar attitudes first dissolved and then decayed in post-war Britain. The romantic exchanges, partly larded between Michael Redgrave and Rosamund John as the slightly older couple, are superbly directed and played and have lost not one whit of their pathos and sense of urgency in the intervening years.

The sacrifices of World War Two were worthwhile. Younger audiences, attuned to regard later wars in a purely political context and certainly not in an idealistic sense, may increasingly regard the romanticism of the original film as a War Only as a War Only as an artificial. Wondering why the lovers aren't protesting the war rather than accepting it. But "The Way to the Stars" isn't that generation's kind of movie anyway. It belongs to, and will continue to move, the people who lived through those years. And when they have done the film will perhaps be a point of historic reference only - but even at that, still a remarkable and permanent emotional record of its time.

William K. Everson

Program Ends approx. 11.10.