THE NEW SCHOOL  FILM SERIES 59: Program #3  June 22, 1988

Aviation movies of the 30's: two variations

THE ACE OF ACES (Rko Radio, 1933) Directed by J. Walter Ruben; Story and screenplay by John Monk Saunders; Camera, Henry Cronjager; 72 mins.
With: Richard Dix (Rex Thomas); Elizabeth Allan (Nancy Adams); Ralph Bellamy (Major Blake); Theodore Newton (Lieut. Kelly); Joe Sawyer (Capt. Daly); Frank Conroy (Col. Wentworth); William Cagney (Lieut. Meeker); Howard Wilson (Lieut. Terry); Helmuth Gorin (German cadet); Art Jarrett (Lieut. Lind) and Anderson Lawler, Clarence Stroud, Frank Melton, Claude Gillingwater, Jr., Carl Eric Hanson, George Lollier.

One of the dying gasps of the big aviation cycle that had started with such a bang with "Wings", "Hell's Angels" and "The Dawn Patrol", "The Ace of Aces" was probably made because Rko studio exec Merian C. Cooper had such an interest in aviation, and because WW1 aviation epics were now becoming almost as standardized as westerns. John Monk Saunders, who had written the minor classic "The Eagle and the Hawk" the year before, here just goes through the motions of turning out a superficially bitter study of war which is really just an excuse for some exciting dogfight scenes. Its main problem is an almost total lack of character motivation in Richard Dix, who undergoes major changes of personality for no other reason than the script tells him to. Originally the plot had him killed off at the end, and most of the official synopses so describe the film, but in fact he survives a hail of machine gun bullets with relative ease. It's hardly a copout, since the film is too artificial to be taken really seriously. Elizabeth Allan's charm stands out against the rather dour (on this occasion) Dix personality, and a decidedly pre-Code situation arises without much fuss when Dix, on leave, tells her rather pointedly that he only has 48 hours and doesn't want to waste it!

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

WINGS OF THE NAVY (Warner Brothers, 1939) Directed by Lloyd Bacon; produced by Jack Warner and Hal B. Wallis; Story and screenplay, Michael Fessier; Camera, Arthur Edeson; aerial photography, Elmer Dyer; 89 mins.
With: George Brent (Cass Harrington); Olivia de Haviland (Irene Dale); John Payne (Jerry Harrington); Frank McHugh (Scat Allen); John Litel (Commander Clark); Victor Jory (Lieut. Parsons); Henry O'Neill (Prologue speaker); John Ridgely (Dan Morrison); John Gallaudet (Lieut. White); Don Briggs (Instructor); Edgar Edwards (Parsons); Regis Toomey (Flight instructor); Albert Morin (Costa); Jonathan Hale (Commandant); Pierre Watkin (Capt. March); Don Douglas (Officer of the Day); Max Hoffman (Drill officer); Alan Davis (Pilot); Larry Williams (aviator)

Originally we had planned to play this with another (but wartime) Lloyd Bacon-Warner film, "Wings for the Eagle", but it proved to be a singularly disappointing film today, so the Richard Dix film was pressed into service instead. "Wings of the Navy" is virtually a Warner at-home week, with all the familiar cliches trotted out - and happily solved very quickly - along with a typical Warner cast from which only Allen Jenkins, Barton MacLane and Alan Hale seem to be missing. It's easy to pull apart a machine-made film like this, but also a little unfair since (a) it is done so expertly, and (b) does provide a form of aerial documentation. While the World War One films continued to be made in the late 30's, especially as WW2 became more probable, most of them (the remake of "The Dawn Patrol" excepted) dealt with the army. Aviation films, and they represented a whole new cycle ("I Wanted Wings", "Men With Wings", "Test Pilot") concerned themselves with modern technology which seemed then to be at its peak, and yet with jets and rockets in use, now seems like ancient history a mere 50 years later. Unlike many of its ilk, "Wings of the Navy" keeps aloft much of the time, and the aviation footage is both historically interesting and beautifully photographed.

Program ends approx. 10.15

-- William K. Everson --