CAUGHT IN THE DRAFT (Paramount, 1941) Directed by David Butler; a B.G. de Sylva production;
Original story and screenplay by Harry Tugend with additional dialogue by Wilkie C. 
Monatny; Camera: Karl Struss; 82 mins. NY premiere, Paramount Theatre.
With Bob Hope (Don Bolton); Dorothy Lamour (Tony Fairbanks); Lynne Overman (Steve); Eddie 
Brocken (Beta); Clarence Kolb (Col. Fairbanks); Paul Hurst (Sergeant Burns); Perikle Boros 
(Yetta); Phyllis Ruth (Margie); Irving Bacon (Coggswell); Arthur Loft (Director of 
Dearing (Recruiting sergeant); Dave Willock (orderly); Peter George Lynn (pilot); Jimmie 
Dodd (patient); Andrew Tombs (Justice of the Peace); Edwin Stanley (Doctor); Franklyn 
Farmm, Edward Heanne (officers).

Although Europe had been at war since 1939, America was still neutral, and Hollywood was 
supposed to be likewise, though since 1940 a few more courageous movies ("The Mortal Storm" 
from MGM, "The Man I Married" from Fox) had taken an anti-Nazi stance, and had been 
of a political nature. But it wasn't about to take any chances however, and of 
all of its 1941 releases, only five - "Hold Back the Dawn", "I Wanted Wings", "One Night in 
London", "Pacific Blackout" and "World Premieres" - had variable tangential relationships to 
the war, and always of a non-political nature. "Caught in the Draft" would be a sixth, 
although it was prompted mainly by the need to come up with fresh, topical material for one of 
its hottest new stars, Bob Hope, and that material was neatly supplied by the enactment of 
a peace-time draft, a draft that also provided material for Abbott & Costello, Laurel & 
Hardy and sundry other comedies of the period. (Hope had been knocking around at Paramount 
in a lesser capacity for a few years, but began to be taken seriously in 1939's 
"The Cat and the Canary"). The draft was useful fodder in that it permitted topical 
reference to the war in Europe, yet avoided political side-taking; Hollywood's espousal of 
it was positive and usually musical, dominated by the theme that service was not only 
patriotic but could also turn mediocre, weaklings and the pampered rich into men. 
"Buck Privates", the Abbott and Costello entry, came out in February; the Bob Hope film 
followed it in May. Reviews were virtually raves from both the trade press and the 
regular press, both hailing "as up-to-date as beginning to end. Perhaps because the 
basic material is now overly-familiar, and more because Hope has done so much better 
since, it seems less funny today - though I recall that even in 1941 when I first saw it 
it seemed amably amusing rather than hilarious. But it is a fact that it moves well 
and is cut well; no gag is milked for more than it is worth, and some gags - like the 
inevitable awkward squad routine - are over almost as soon as they begin, allowing no 
time for familiarity to breed contempt. Some of the topical and political one-liners 
clearly don't carry as much clout as they did in 1941, but they serve well as punctuation 
and give Hope amusing lines to deliver without stopping the film in the process. What it 
really lacks though, and surprisingly, is a sense of the period. Abbott and Costello's 
"Buck Privates" really did capture the fervour and energy of the period, almost in the 
same way that King Vidor's "The Big Parade" did for World War One. "Caught in the Draft" 
seems to see the period merely as a convenient background for Hope's antics, and aim 
at nothing more. Possibly the surprising lack of songs and period music has something to 
do with that; the "Buck Privates" songs really captured the energy, the sentiment and 
the patriotism of those years exceptionally well. And here's something of a mystery: the film's 
credits list a Frank Loesser song "How'd You Like To Love Me?" but it appears nowhere in 
the film, although early on in the proceedings Hope does hum a bar or two of it as a kind of 
reprise. If it over appeals, it would have to have been early in the film, possibly 
in the scenes where Hope is pursuing Lamour in the hope of marriage (and an exemption) 
and probably in a night-club scene. Yet there are no physical cuts in the print at that point, 
so presumably it was a negative cut for either the original release or the later tv 
release. Furthering the mystery: "Variety" always listed songs in their reviews and 
credits as a matter of course, but makes no mention of this one, nor do any of the key 
reviews of the period refer to a song. (One can understand possible losing of rights 
leading to exclusion from the later tv release, but that wouldn't explain it being so 
un-acknowledged initially). I frankly don't remember the film well enough from 1941 to 
recall whether it was there or not, but "Variety" not listing it, and the present running time 
of the film corresponding to the original running time, does create something of a 
mystery. In any event, while the film is minor Hope, it's enjoyable and an interesting 
reflection of Hollywood's interest in, yet caution over, war themes in 1941.

--- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION ---

LUCKY JORDAN (Paramount, 1942) Directed by Frank Tuttle; Produced by Fred Kohlmar; 
Screenplay by Darrell Ware and Karl Tunberg; Camera: John Seitz; 83 mins. NY premiere, 
Rialto Theatre.
With Alan Ladd (Lucky Jordan); Helen Walker (Jill Evans); Sheldon Leonard (Slip Moran); 
Mabel Paige (Annie); Marie MacDonald (Pearl); Lloyd Corrigan (Ernest Higgins); Russell 
Hoyd (Eddie); Dave Willock (Angelo); John Wengraf (Kesselman); Anthony Caruso (gunman); 
Al Hill, Fred Kohler Jr. (killers); Terry Ray (Sentry); Elliott Sullivan, Bud McFaggart, 
Keith Richards (soldiers); Sara Berner (Helen); Lyle Latell (Army Guard); William 
Forrest (Commanding Officer); Paul Stanton (Draft official); Virginia Farmer, Ethel 
Clayton (women extras); Jack Roberts (Johnny).
After Pearl Harbour, and with America officially in the war, there was of course no longer any need to pull any punches - but Paramount, being a decidedly commercial and entertainment-oriented company, didn't let its patriotism get out of hand, though at least it was able to take a positive stand in the war and war-related films that it made. Actually in 1942, "Wake Island" was its only all-out war film, backed up by another 10 thrillers, spy films, dramas, musicals and comedies in some way directly associated with the war; even in 1943, their total of such films was only 12, a smaller percentage than could be found at most of the other studios.

Alan Ladd had been around in bits and small parts since 1932, but had just hit it really big at Paramount in "This Gun For Hire" and "The Glass Key", "Lucky Jordan", which came next, was his first starring film, and in order to really test the waters, Paramount didn't give him much help. They took away the chemistry of Veronica Lake as leading lady, and made the film on a fairly small budget. They didn't even book it into the Paramount Theatre, but shunted it into the Ralston a block away! But it got excellent reviews (mainly because of Ladd, all reviewers admitting that he needed and deserved better scripts), and played six weeks at the Ralston to top business.

Tough guys in World War 2 -- Robinson and Bogart especially -- usually went the same route at first: Damon Runyon-type tongue-in-cheek actioners in which they defied the Nastis and learned patriotism, and later more serious (relatively speaking) works in which they sacrificed their lives at the end. "Lucky Jordan" was Ladd's Runyonesque film, the subsequent "China" the nobler one. "Lucky Jordan" because of its lightness and lack of other star names has virtually disappeared, never revived theatrically, and very infrequently shown on tv. It's a minor film, but that's perhaps part of its charm. It could very easily, with a shorter running time, have been a "B" for Lloyd Nolan. The almost deliberate refusal to build it into a full-fledged "A" means that it keeps the easy-going flavor of a "B", but also has some periods of slack. It starts out beautifully as though it is going to be a full-scale follow-up to "The Glass Key". Art director Hans Dreier creates one of his typically cold art-deco sets for the gangster's hq. Sheldon Leonard is as always a superb opposing villain, and there's a cold, brittle quality to the opening reel. Then the Damon Runyon characteristics enter, primarily in the form of the sentiment-creating Nabel Paige character, and the focus changes. It becomes a gentler picture, though still with bursts of violence and tough dialogue exchanges, a strange direction to take if its main aim was to test Ladd's solo boxoffice value. But there's certainly no shortage of expert, tough thrillers from the forties, and this one's change of pace makes it a rather pleasing novelty, enhanced no little by the presence and performance of Helen Walker, an under-rated and under-used actress who died too young.

Neither film tonight represents top Hope or top Ladd — or even top comedy or top melodrama from the period — but both are an interesting comment on Paramount's careful sliding into the war zone, and nurturing two of their top stars for that new market.

William K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10.30.
Discussion/Question period follows.