

Reproduced by kind permission of Evensford Productions Limited and Pollinger Limited. Copyright c Evensford Productions Limited, 1942.

The Film in War

By H. E. B.

During the last war, the film industry was still in its infancy. Its purpose was to entertain. This it did, somewhat crudely and in jerks. The British film industry had made a flying start by the summer of 1914. It suffered an immediately relapse with the war and we relinquished to America a position of pre-eminence which we have never recovered. By 1915, D. W. Griffith had produced *The Birth of a Nation*, and with it he had established the cinema as the foremost medium for story-telling. But the film as we know it to-day had still far to go. Hollywood was as yet only a glint in the film magnate's eye.

Much celluloid has run through the projectors since then. A million miles of miscellaneous comedy, melodrama, news-reel and documentary subjects have been paraded before a receptive public. The film is now the most forceful of all mediums, not only for telling a story, but for education and the moulding of public opinion. Much of what we know about the world is learned in the cinema. A three-minute news-reel of the Libyan campaign remains vividly in the memory long after a three-column article on the same subject is forgotten. The film is visual and thus provides a far greater stimulus to the sluggish imagination than the written word.

The second World War finds the film full grown and of vast power. It is necessary to analyse its many functions so that we may determine whether it is being used to the greatest advantage.

As entertainment, pure and simple, the film is fulfilling its purpose. Quantity is being reduced, and this usually improves quality. The first headlong rush to produce topical war films has subsided now that producers realize that those connected with war often like to forget it during their hours of relaxation. Moreover, the inevitable artificiality of the professional actor in war films often becomes too glaringly apparent. Air crew can watch Clark Gable or Errol Flynn in the part of a Fifth Avenue play-boy or an old-time gambler of the Barbary

Coast and find them realistic. But a Hollywood actor playing a Sergeant Pilot on ops over Bremen is at a disadvantage in a Station cinema, where half his audience have forgotten more about the part than he is ever likely to know.

The best films of the last war were not produced until several years after it had finished. It may be that we shall have to wait until the 1950's before this present struggle can be viewed dispassionately and objectively on the screen; before Lewis Milestone's successor arises, to direct another *All Quiet on the Western Front*, or Sherriff to write a second *Journey's End*.

In the meantime, the film has more urgent business in connection with the war. Its use for propaganda and publicity is obvious. In this respect, the documentary films, which tell a true story, with real people, have come into their own. *Target For Tonight* is the obvious example. But there have been many others, such as *Wavell's Thirty Thousand* and *The Defeat of the Germans near Moscow*. Such films can tell the world the true stories of the war, and compared with them, the fictional film with a war background is but a pale shadow of reality.

The film in war-time must also record. This is an essential function. Apart from being entertainment and propaganda, it must preserve a visual history of the war in all its stages, so that future historians may be given a presentation of pictorial fact such as their predecessors have never been able to enjoy.

Consider how Carlyle could have used a news reel of the events of 1789-1793 when writing his history of the French Revolution! What would Gibbon have given for a complete library of documentary films covering the many stages in the decline and fall of the Holy Roman Empire?

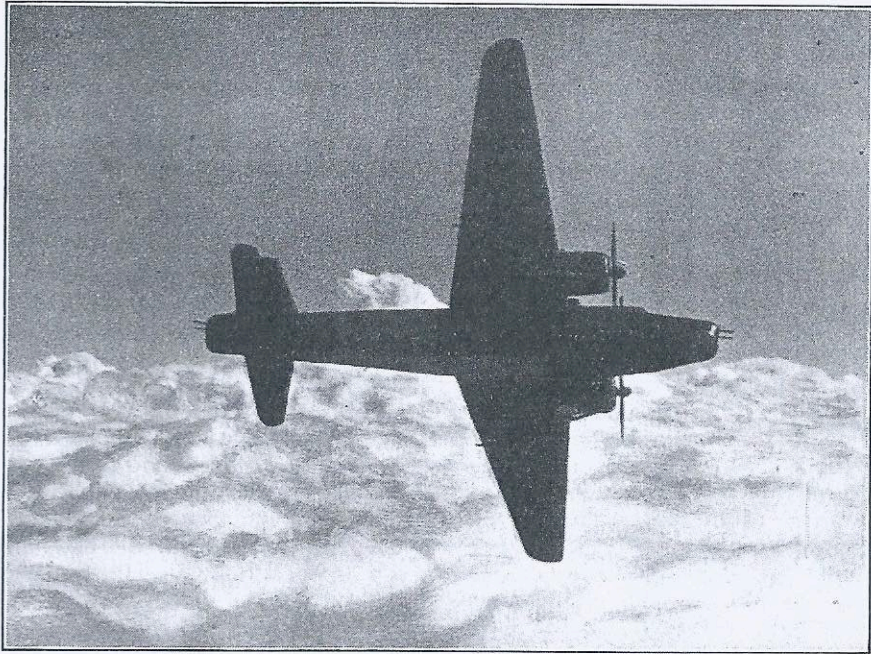
The film must also instruct and educate. This, too, is a most essential function. Films of aerial combat and the tactics employed are already of great help in training future pilots. There is no limit to

ROYAL AIR FORCE JOURNAL

which such instruction can be extended. The film can teach the recruit almost anything, from the correct way to march to the conditions he must expect when he fights in Libya, or goes to training schools in the U.S.A. or Canada. A film of the life on the Gold Coast could give an airman a better picture of what to expect in West Africa than innumerable lectures on the same subject.

Almost every aspect of welfare, from cooking to pitching tents, from first-aid treatment to P.T. drill, can be illustrated by the motion picture camera. It can show a man how to tackle an incendiary bomb or how to protect himself in unarmed combat, far more quickly and effectively than a dozen text books.

Perhaps the most important aspect of film



A Bomber on its way to Germany.

From "Target for To-night"

A film can often give bomber pilots valuable information about their target—what it looks like from the ground and from the air, with perhaps a detailed panorama of the country that surrounds it. Such a film need not necessarily have been taken with any such object in view. Some time ago, for example, it was discovered that a hotel, which in peace-time had been a delightful little mountain resort, was being used by the Germans as a training centre. It so happened that there were some travel films of the locality available, and the crews detailed for the attack were shown these in secret. From them they learned the exact position of the hotel, its out-buildings and the railway.

education in war-time is its influence on Security. At R.A.F. Stations where *The Next of Kin* has been shown, for example, the reaction has been instantaneous and most marked. This admirable film has brought home the lesson of careless talk in a way which no lecture or poster has ever done. The average airman is not an unreasonable being and he will at once stop doing a thing when he realizes the reason why. There are two methods of protecting Security in the Services. One is to punish offenders so severely that they and everyone else are frightened into discretion. The other is to make Security-mindedness instinctive, by means of a comprehensive scheme of Security education. Both

ROYAL AIR FORCE JOURNAL

methods are effective. But the latter is the more desirable from the point of view of the Air Ministry as well as of the personnel concerned.

The Next of Kin fulfilled an urgent need by its brilliant dramatization of the key-lesson of Security Education. That key-lesson shows that what seem to be unimportant scraps of information can be pieced together to form a comprehensive picture.

The story of *The Next of Kin* would have been effective in a lecture or a book and its message came over very well when it was broadcast. But only the cinema could present it pictorially. The actual sight of members of the Services being mown down by gun fire brought home the full lesson of careless talk to everybody who saw the film.

The criticism which *The Next of Kin* at once provokes is that it was not generally released throughout the Services before the third year of the war, and that it is unique, instead of being but one of a series of similar films with the same urgent message and the same effectiveness in the lesson they set out to teach.

Security films and all educational films must be good if they are to be successful. They must be made by experts with the technical standards of commercial films: standards to which the film public have become accustomed. The best script-writers, cameramen, directors and actors will be needed. And they are available, for in Britain to-day we have the finest documentary directors in the world and some

commercial directors who are up to the best Hollywood standards.

Security-mindedness among personnel is still deplorably low. There is no more effective weapon than the cinema for counteracting this regrettable state of affairs. It has already been proved that comic posters and lectures are not enough.

The uses of the film in war-time are as follows—to provide entertainment in which the film has always specialized; to serve as a medium for propaganda which can be distributed throughout the world; to record, with a pictorial history of the War; and finally, to instruct in technical, tactical and general subjects and to promote Security-mindedness.

Many films will serve more than one of these purposes. A propaganda film must also be good entertainment. This is true also of the documentary film—the film of fact. As for the educational film, it will fail dismally if it cannot make instruction interesting. We must have “pleasure and instruction, hand in hand.” The great value of the cinema in education is that it need never be boring. Fortunately, educationalists have long since discarded the Victorian view that lessons should never be anything but dull.

“What the eye does not see, the mind does not worry about” has an obvious corollary—“What the eye sees, the mind does not forget.” It is through the eye that the film makes contact with the mind, and therein lies its strength.

R.C.A.F.

Many Canadians serving on Royal Air Force Stations do not seem to have heard of the excellent publication, “Wings Abroad” which is produced for their benefit. The Editor writes to us:—

It is our desire to have “Wings Abroad” reach as many of our R.C.A.F. personnel as possible. You will appreciate that there are large numbers attached to R.A.F. Stations, in large and small groups. It is rather difficult to reach these groups, and we are of the opinion that an item in your publication would bring it to the attention of those who are serving.

“Wings Abroad”, which is self-supporting, is published each week. Subscriptions (by post) are as follows:—Three shillings for three months, five shillings for six months, and ten shillings for a year. Address “Wings Abroad”, 20, Lincoln’s Inn Fields, London, W.C.2.