

**'Toast and Torpedoes':  
World War Two Naval Warfare on Film  
1939-1960**

**by**

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## ABSTRACT

This study will make an original contribution to the understanding of how naval warfare in World War Two was presented in popular British cinema between 1939 and 1960. The study examines the distinctive nature of naval war films, notable for the way in which both the warlike and domestic are mixed, and uses this as the starting-point to consider what the films reveal of attitudes about social class, gender roles, and 'the enemy'; and how this has been modified since 1945. It considers changes in representation between wartime and post-war films by analysing a selection of films using an empirical and historical methodology developed by Richards, Chapman and others, which places them in the context of the social and political climate of their production. The shift towards portraying an 'officer's war' in post war naval films has been examined in terms of its suggested causes, amongst which are class conflict, the availability of source material for film-makers, and a nation attempting consolation in the face of lost pre-eminence.

Furthermore, the portrayal of 'the domestic' in the films allows the study to examine the connections between wartime masculinities and the shaping of attitudes to the enemy, to a sense of national identity and also to the way the wartime role and conduct of women is shown. This complements an examination of the way the portrayal of different social classes and the use in films of 'accented' language link to the promotion of the ideal of a 'People's War'. The contrast between the portrayal of this idea in wartime film and its postwar modification completes the study.

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# **Contents**

Acknowledgements

Page 1

**1 Introduction, Literature Review and Methodology**

Page 12

**2 The Battle of the Atlantic and the Convoy System**

Page 20

**3 The Merchant Navy and the Convoy System**

Page 32

**4 Undersea Warfare**

Page 42

**5 Other Naval Operations**

Page 51

**6 Naval War Films in the Post-War Era**

Page 68

## **7 Conclusion**

Page 75

## **Bibliography**

Page 83

## **Filmography**

## INTRODUCTION, LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

This study will seek to contribute to an understanding of how the image of naval warfare in World War Two has been presented in popular British cinema between 1939 and 1960; and to consider changes in representation between wartime and post-war films. The study will consider the social and political context of the films; what the films reveal of attitudes about social class, gender roles, and 'the enemy'; and how these images have been modified since 1945. The reasons why the post-1945 differences are so marked will also be considered and the choice of methodology used in the study will be explained. Subsequent chapters will examine films made about the Royal Navy's work in convoy protection, the Merchant Navy's vital wartime function and the part played by submarine forces. The execution of other operations will be examined in order to demonstrate the breadth of naval actions. Finally, the way in which post-war films have addressed the varied aspects of naval warfare will also be considered.

Warlike and domestic attributes are mixed in many naval war films, with the ship acting as Jonathan Rayner<sup>1</sup> argues both as a "weapon of war and a communal, private space away from conflict". It is this distinctive feature which informs the present study, using it as the linking factor between an examination of the themes of social class, gender roles and attitudes to the enemy in naval war films. In doing so, the portrayal of 'the domestic' allows the study to examine the connections between wartime masculinities and the shaping of attitudes to the enemy, to a sense of national identity and also to the way the wartime role and conduct of women is shown. This stands alongside and complements the examination of the way that the portrayal of different social classes and the use in films of 'accented' language link to the promotion of the ideal of a 'People's War'.

Furthermore, when issues such as the role of the Merchant Navy are considered, this has brought into sharper relief some features of the modification of the idea of the 'People's War', especially as its contribution is well-recorded by film makers during the war, but is never seen centre-stage after the conflict has ended. In the present study it is therefore intended to examine standard discourses (centred on class, gender roles, attitudes to the enemy) and

incorporate them into an overall discussion of the way that post war films modified the idea of the 'People's War', viewing the whole through the particular combination of 'warlike' and 'domestic' aspects unique to films with a maritime setting.

What follows is a brief description of the source materials used in the study, a review of the literature consulted, and the methodology adopted.

## **Sources and Literature Review**

### **Films**

The main source material used in the present study is, of course, films that have naval warfare in World War Two as their subject. There are a large number of films from which to choose. The attractiveness of naval subjects for film-makers has been attributed to Britain's maritime tradition<sup>2</sup>, with one study<sup>3</sup> suggesting that more films with a maritime basis were made in the post-war period than any other type of war film. This range of potential materials means that some criteria have had to be set in making a selection for the present study. The selection of films to be analysed has been devised to meet two main aims. Firstly films have been chosen to give coverage to the major aspects of the war at sea, as it affected both the Royal Navy and the Merchant Navy. Secondly, the films have been chosen to enable as far as possible a comparison to be made between those that were made during the course of the Second World War, and those made in the post-war period.

Accordingly, the films *CONVOY* (1940), *CORVETTES* (1941), *CORVETTE PORT ARTHUR* (1943) were chosen to allow for the examination of convoy escort operations in the Battle of the Atlantic. *THE GIFT HORSE* (1952), *THE KEY* (1958) and *THE CRUEL SEA* (1953) are used to continue the examination into the post-war period, and to show areas of difference in the approach taken by film-makers, when compared to wartime output. In order to show the way in which the same battle affected the Merchant Navy, the wartime productions *SAN DEMETRIO LONDON* (1943) and *WESTERN APPROACHES* (1944) were chosen. Additionally, . *MERCHANT SEAMEN* (1940), *FOR FREEDOM* (1940) and *A SEAMAN'S STORY* (1942) were selected to show how the role of the merchant service was portrayed in the early part of the war. No direct comparison with post war films is possible as no later productions foreground the role of the merchant service in the same way. This in itself forms one of the largest changes noticeable between wartime and post war productions, which will be considered more fully in a later chapter.

The part played by submarines as shown during wartime caused the selection of *WE DIVE AT DAWN* (1943) and *CLOSE QUARTERS* (1943). The post-war portrayal of underwater operations is represented by *ABOVE US THE WAVES* (1955), which is based on the use of X-Craft 'midget submarines' against the *Tirpitz*. *THE SILENT ENEMY* (1958) is based on the activities of naval demolition divers, and the use of the Chariot 'human torpedo' against the Italian fleet. Conventional surface operations are depicted in *FOR FREEDOM* (1940), *IN WHICH WE SERVE* (1942), *THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE* (1957) and *SINK THE BISMARCK!* (1960).

Some restrictions have been placed on the selection. Clearly, not every film with maritime content can be used. Even if consideration is only given to feature films which have the war at sea as a central element of the plot this would mean analysing more than ten films made during the war, and a similar number made during the 1950s; unmanageable for the purposes of this study. Similarly, a deliberate decision has been made to not select films made after 1960. After that date, films generally altered in tenor. Instead of the low-key, small scale narratives made familiar in wartime and the 1950s there was a shift of emphasis towards the 'epic'. A 'war' setting became simply a backdrop for adventure stories, or large scale features.

#### **Other primary sources**

A further source that has been used is contemporary film reviews. Reviews have been referenced from a variety of sources, in order to achieve a degree of balance. Whilst not losing sight of the attitudes prevailing at the time of writing, and the editorial position of the publication in which the review appeared, an impression can be gained of the way films were received on release. Reference has also been made to the *Naval Review*.<sup>4</sup> Its usefulness derives from its coverage of a variety of issues contemporary to the films under study. In addition, the Ministry of War Transport's official history of the merchant service offers its own insight into the way the Merchant Navy's vital contribution was viewed during the conflict.<sup>5</sup> Other contemporary source materials such as Admiralty interrogation records, give an assessment of the wartime situation gleaned from captured U-Boat crews, and suggest something of the prevailing attitudes to 'the enemy'.<sup>6</sup> (Interestingly, film portrayals of 'the enemy' concentrate almost exclusively on Germany. While some films also show Italian combatants, they are usually held up as figures of ridicule).

## **Background studies on films**

In addition to the films selected for examination, the study also engages with existing scholarship taking films of the Second World War as a subject. A number of important studies have already been published which have explored key themes of these films: the attempt to show regional variety and harmony; consensus across social classes; the promotion of common goals in pursuing victory; the promotion of an active role for women in the war, and so on. These are all features of what has been termed 'The People's War'. However, most studies, either of wartime or of post-war films, have focused on war on land, or in the air, and on the Home Front. There has been no real attempt to examine the naval war. The exception is the recent book by Jonathan Rayner. This work covers film narratives set in a broad range of historical periods, not only the Second World War. Drawing on existing studies into the war film genre Rayner proposes that naval war films form a separate film genre. In order to support his contention, Rayner lists several common characteristics which would denote a distinct naval war film genre.<sup>7</sup> As well as the combination of the 'warlike' and the 'domestic' noted before the idea that seafarers endure both a dangerous human enemy and a dangerous natural one chimes well with the portrayals seen in many films.

The following studies are general in nature, covering the full range of films within the war film genre. This forms the general framework of ideas which allows the present study to obtain a specific focus on naval warfare as portrayed in films.

In Roger Manvell's overview of war films produced both during and after the Second World War, he describes the way in which films portrayed the war to the public, helping to form their attitude to it. He notes how this portrayal changed over time<sup>8</sup>, affecting the image of service people, civilians, and the enemy in the popular imagination.

Within his survey, Clive Coultass draws attention to the attraction of naval subjects to film-makers<sup>9</sup>. This he attributes to the maritime tradition of the nation, and also to the pivotal role played by both the Royal Navy and Merchant Navy in maintaining trade routes during the Battle of the Atlantic. He also concerns himself with the way feature films and documentaries can provide a window on the nature of the nation at war.

Nicholas Pronay's survey<sup>10</sup> is confined to those films produced in the post-war period. Seeking a reason for the popularity of the post-war cycle of war films, Pronay suggests that the primary purpose of these films was to provide a cathartic release for the audience. Pronay also uses the term the "post bellum post mortem enquiry". This would seem to imply that the films

allowed audiences to re-examine the war, their role in it, and, after deliberation, to come to terms with it.

John Ramsden's contribution also concentrates on the film output of the 1950s.<sup>11</sup> He asks bluntly whether post-war films made such changes to the portrayal of the conflict as to 'betray' the idea of the 'People's War' familiar from most wartime films. His conclusion is that they do, by making certain fundamental changes. Whilst noting the difference in attitudes displayed towards social class, and towards gender relations, Ramsden considers that the most obvious difference between wartime and post-war films is that the latter were made with the prior knowledge of victory (unlike wartime films which had a propagandist aim in developing the will to fight and to win). The films do not need to explain how this would be achieved; rather, they provide confirmation of the victory. The active cooperation of military institutions is the basis of a study undertaken by S.P. Mackenzie.<sup>12</sup> Mackenzie shows how the Admiralty, although originally reluctant, came to understand the benefits in co-operating in the making of films which presented the navy in a positive light.

Robert Murphy's study covers film production both during and after the Second World War in general terms, concentrating on British films.<sup>13</sup> Notably, he sees the output as offering indications of the concerns of the time. These, he notes, centre on gender relations, class relations, and attitudes to foreigners. Like Ramsden, he notes how post-war output shows a return to a separation of 'officers and other ranks', as well as a tendency to try and relive past glories. Neil Rattigan has argued that this tendency in the British war films of the 1950s was a consequence of the middle class deliberately seeking to re-assert primacy by re-fighting the war on film, and in so-doing, privileging their own role in victory.<sup>14</sup> The view that there is a tendency towards a more socially conservative perspective in war films produced in the 1950s is one shared by Harper and Porter. Their study suggests that after 1953 films were notable for overlaying traditional social class boundaries with the structures of military hierarchy.<sup>15</sup>

James Chapman sees the origin of a particular view of the nation at war in British films as stemming from the output sponsored (or at least, officially approved) by the wartime Ministry of Information.<sup>16</sup> The propaganda effect the Ministry sought from newsreels, documentary output and from feature film production is part of Aldgate and Richards' study.<sup>17</sup> Their work also notes the small number of films which depict women's war service in an active sense<sup>18</sup> as most film portrayals remained fixed on showing women on the 'Home Front', supporting men in the fighting services.

In conclusion, therefore, most studies of war films in Britain are concerned with the idea of how the 'People's War' was portrayed, during the war itself, or how, after 1945, that image was subsequently modified. The specifics of this will be considered in more detail later.

### **Background studies on naval warfare**

Whilst close analysis of films lies at the heart of the present study, there is also a need to be mindful of the actual historical background to these productions. Setting the films in context is integral to the methodology adopted. Accordingly, an appreciation of the wartime situation and disposition of the Royal and Merchant Navies will form one feature of the contextual analysis.

Brian Lavery's study contains much useful detail on the Royal and Merchant Navies in the Second World War, specifically in relation to the selection and training methods adopted by each service.<sup>19</sup> Correlli Barnett has produced an extensive study of the role played by the Royal Navy in World War Two. Barnett's work considers the need to assure control of the sea both to preserve the 'home front' and also in order to fully prosecute the war by land or air operations.<sup>20</sup>

Other studies which provide useful background detail take a specific aspect of naval warfare as their focus. Schofield concentrates on the Battle of the Atlantic, and the tactics adopted to counter U-Boat attacks.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, MacGregor's study takes a broader perspective, choosing to centre his study on the ways in which tried-and-tested strategy from the First World War had to be relearned, having been set aside during the inter-war years.<sup>22</sup>

This list of naval background sources is, of necessity, highly selective. The range of potential material is large, and the scope of the present study does not allow for intensive work on actual wartime events. The background material which is used has been chosen in order to assist in setting the films analysed into the historical context.

### **Other Sources**

Wartime propaganda policy and practice forms one feature of understanding the context of those films that were produced during the conflict. Some detail has been obtained from work produced by Philip Taylor.<sup>23</sup> Taylor, whilst not exclusively focusing on films, does nonetheless give a useful insight into the work of the Ministry of Information, and how preparations were made pre-war. Similarly, Robert Mackay<sup>24</sup> taking as his theme the study of civilian morale considers the ways in which it was bolstered, particularly by the use of the mass media of the day. Ian McLaine's study of the Ministry of Information provided an interesting insight into the

idea of 'timeliness' as an important factor in ensuring the effectiveness of propaganda. This is something which is relevant in considering the delayed release of WESTERN APPROACHES, discussed later.<sup>25</sup>

Additionally, some consideration has been given to how naval war films portrayed masculinity. For this, reference has been made to the work of Andrew Spicer<sup>26</sup> and Christine Geraghty.<sup>27</sup> Each relates the shifting notion of masculinity to its portrayal in film, both during the Second World War and in its aftermath. Spicer suggests that post-war films saw a reversion-albeit with some modification-to a kind of ideal of 'gentlemanly' conduct, while Geraghty notes the emphasis placed on 'control', both of the physical self and of the emotional. Furthermore, reference has been made to the work of Sonya Rose on 'temperate masculinity'. This combination of the anti-heroic aspects of masculinity which were a reaction to the First World War, and the stereotypical 'soldier-adventurer', came to be reflective of ideals of good citizenship in general, and stood in opposition to the aggressively hyper-masculine figure of the jack-booted enemy.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, some insight into the use of accented language, its linkage to ideas of social class, and the way in which this gelled with the promotion of a 'People's War' has been gained from Jo Fox's work on the subject.<sup>29</sup>

### **Methodology**

A variety of methodological approaches have been used in previous studies of British films and the Second World War. For convenience, one commentator separated these into three basic strands, which might be termed the 'Old School' film historians, the 'Theorists', and the 'Empiricists'.<sup>30</sup> The 'Old School' film historians are exemplified by Roger Manvell, Paul Rotha and Basil Wright. Their involvement in film propaganda during the Second World War influenced their approach, favouring the 'wartime wedding' between feature and documentary methods, with an emphasis on realism. As a consequence, a group of films which seemed to typify these elements emerged as signifying 'quality'. The accepted view amongst those influenced by the 'Old School' was that the finest hour of British wartime filmmaking came after 1942, when the effects of the 'wartime wedding' led to productions such as *IN WHICH WE SERVE*, *THE FOREMAN WENT TO FRANCE*, and *SAN DEMETRIO LONDON*.

The 'Theorists', in contrast, are influenced by the Italian Marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci. Using the term 'hegemony' to denote how one social group assumes a predominant position, Gramsci extends this idea to encompass how the dominant group's world view comes to be

accepted as the norm. Gramsci also asserts that there is constant 'struggle' between different ideologies as a consequence. The 'Theorists' assess films from this position, arguing that meanings attached to a particular event, like the Second World War are constantly re-constructed. For example, one 'Theorist', Neil Rattigan, has argued that the foregrounding of officers in war films made in the 1950s happened as a consequence of the middle class deliberately seeking to reassert itself after the post-war changes in society appeared to challenge their predominance.

The method that has been used in the present study is empirical and historical in basis, and is of the kind developed by Richards<sup>31</sup> and others of the 'Empiricist' school of thought. It is therefore, neither highly theoretical in basis, or centred on a belief that there is a particular canon of 'quality' film output, based on the possession of certain attributes. Instead, it involves the critical and analytical examination of films to establish how themes and ideas are conveyed. In addition, and importantly, the structure and content of the film is placed in context. This establishes a balance between making a purely textual analysis, and making an analysis of the context of the film. The aim is to establish not just 'what the film says', but why it is said, and to set the whole in the context of the political and social situation of its production.<sup>32</sup>

The contextual aspects of the film do not just involve the social and political situation at the time of the film's production, however. Ultimately, there has to be an assessment of the reception of the film on its release. This can be achieved by studying a variety of sources such as fan polls, newspaper reviews, or the level of box office returns. In addition, the situation prevailing within film industry at the time of the productions and the constraints so imposed must be considered. For example the influence of the Ministry of Information's policy for film propaganda has to be taken into account when assessing films made during the Second World War. To this end, the next section seeks to give some insight into the influence of the Ministry of Information.

### **The Ministry of Information and Wartime Film Propaganda**

As the methodology used in the present study dictates that film productions are set in context, an appreciation of the part played by the Ministry of Information is central to understanding films made in Britain during the Second World War. The intention is not to give a detailed account, as this is beyond the scope of the present study. Rather, an outline of the development of the Ministry's film propaganda policy will be attempted.

As early as 1935, plans had been put in place to set up a Ministry of Information (MOI) in the event of hostilities, with the maintenance of morale and the development of propaganda policy as its brief. Factors which would determine the population's morale were translated into the promotion of three main aims, of which the generation of an overall commitment to national war aims and effort was one.<sup>33</sup> Given that cinema-going was an immensely popular leisure activity (with cinema attendance standing at 19 million each week in 1939)<sup>34</sup>, the importance of using films to promote the official view of why and how the war needed to be fought was clear. The MOI Films Division's task therefore, was to establish the policy for showing Britain and its people at war. Distinct roles were apportioned to different kinds of film production, and were contained in the MOI Programme for Film Propaganda, published in January 1940.<sup>35</sup>

The Programme was devised by Kenneth Clark who became Head of the Films Division at the end of 1939. Clark took the basic tenets of the MOI propaganda policy and linked them to the production of films, with the aim of showing the principles underlying British wartime propaganda.<sup>36</sup> These principles were enumerated as: 'What Britain is fighting for', 'How Britain fights', and 'The need for sacrifice if the fight is to be won'.<sup>37</sup> Clark's belief was that feature films would best illustrate the first tenet, and documentaries the second. He was keen that British values and institutions like freedom and democracy were shown in feature films, and although he did not see documentaries as playing as great a part in propaganda<sup>38</sup> he nonetheless saw the medium as providing the best means to display 'How Britain fights', via films showing all aspects of the war effort, frontline and industrial. Not all of Clark's principles were realised. However, enough were used in practice to show that he had the foresight to anticipate the ways in which film output could best be put to propaganda use. Clark in effect set the agenda which his successors would follow.

Clark was replaced as Head of the Films Division in April 1940 by Jack Beddington, a man well-versed in publicity and public relations, having been director of publicity at Shell Mex and BP. Beddington appreciated that commercial features had a part to play in film propaganda. He indicated to the British Film Producers Association that support would be offered to any kind of production, so long as it was felt to be a 'good' film. (This was seen especially in the support offered to films on non-war subjects, after a speaker at the Producers Association in July 1942 suggested audiences had become tired of war films).<sup>39</sup>

Practically speaking, a 'good' film was one that the MOI believed would be suitable for its overall aims, or a topic which it was felt would work well overseas, to state those aims. With

such aims in mind, once approval had been given, the Ministry would often facilitate the release of film stock, or the demobilisation of actors to appear in productions.<sup>40</sup> Both 'war' and 'non-war' propaganda would be supported, but on strict provisos. Films had to emphasise the democratic values of Britain, and its positive national characteristics. For 'non-war' subjects, a set of suggestions were also given. Productions ought to be realistic in nature, and cover stories about everyday life, not necessarily directly about the war, but containing some events on the home and industrial fronts.<sup>41</sup>

At the heart of official propaganda policy lay the emphasis on showing consensus, social cohesion, equality of involvement and of sacrifice. With this encouragement the idea of 'the People's War' became, arguably, the primary theme of film-making in Britain during the Second World War.<sup>42</sup> How the official policy reviewed above was adopted and used by wartime film-makers will be the subject of more detailed consideration in the next chapters of this study. Additionally, consideration will also be given to how the approach of post-war film makers differed, and how this affected the films that were produced.

To conclude, it can be seen that the decision has been made to use a broad range of source materials, whilst retaining manageability of the sources by not attempting to cover too much ground. The intention, within these self-imposed limitations, has been to establish the historical events that gave rise to the films under consideration, critically assess the films themselves and the ways in which the key themes are handled (and how some of these themes can be linked), and do so with an awareness of the prior scholarship in the field. In so doing, given the unique combination of the combative and the domestic aspects of shipboard life (as opposed to other military communities where there is a greater separation between the two) it is hoped that this study will be a contribution to the existing scholarship.

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## THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC AND THE CONVOY SYSTEM

Keeping the Atlantic trade routes open was absolutely vital to Britain. The need to sustain the war effort, to feed the population of Britain and support the Empire combined to produce an immense demand on merchant shipping and on the Royal Navy to provide protection. All other campaigns fought by Britain in the Second World War were of a secondary and dependent nature when compared to the Battle of the Atlantic, which was the pivotal campaign of the war on which victory or the prospect of defeat turned.<sup>1</sup>

When essential imports of raw materials and foodstuffs were estimated in 1937, the amount stood at 47 million tons each year.<sup>2</sup> Even after a reappraisal in 1943 the requirement for essential imports remained at 27 million tons.<sup>3</sup> By that stage, monthly shipping losses had reached 0.5 million tons, almost as bad as the situation in 1917, when 30% of Britain's merchant fleet had been sunk.<sup>4</sup> The prevailing opinion in the Admiralty would seem to have been that Germany was close to achieving the aim noted by Churchill in his 1941 'Battle of the Atlantic' directive, namely severing Britain's trade link to the United States. Enabling merchant ships to get through with their cargoes therefore demanded a strategy designed to counter the effect of enemy commerce raiders. The development of a strategy to counter enemy attempts to disrupt or destroy maritime trade was at first hampered by a failure to use the lessons learned by the Royal Navy in the First World War.<sup>5</sup> Whilst tactics based on the use of convoy and patrol aircraft had been proven to be effective, other tactics, such as hunting groups, had been tried and discredited as valid counter-measures.

Despite this, after 1918 such successful tactics came under scrutiny. For example, Dudley Pound, as Assistant Chief of Naval Staff, held that the use of convoys would expose shipping to greater risk from commerce raiders. (Interestingly, a view shared by the Kriegsmarine's Admiral Raeder who favoured the use of battleships in commerce raiding groups).<sup>6</sup> The perceived risk from surface raiders such as the battleships *Bismarck* and *Tirpitz*, and the Panzerschiff-or 'pocket battleship'- *Graf Spee* would dictate the Royal Navy's response. Details on night attacks by U-Boats, and the use of 'wolf pack' tactics were available, yet the Staff College as late as 1934 devoted only one hour to the study of anti-submarine operations. This was in contrast to

the three days expended on the study of the Jutland action. Moreover, the previously discredited idea of using anti-submarine 'hunting groups' began to find new advocates.<sup>7</sup>

This has been attributed to the development of ASDIC in the latter stages of the First World War, which appeared to offer the solution to the U-Boat problem, and seemed to encourage a more active approach than that of the necessarily defensive escort system. ASDIC detected submarines by using sound waves.<sup>8</sup> An audible 'ping' and a returning echo revealed a submerged target. Unfortunately, ASDIC had limitations to its usefulness. Schofield concedes that at Admiralty level the real threat posed by enemy submarines at the outbreak of hostilities was not fully realised.<sup>9</sup> Given the U-Boat force's use of night surface attacks, ASDIC was ineffective as a detection measure, as the equipment could not adequately detect surface objects.

Notwithstanding Dudley Pound's qualms, convoys were reintroduced at the start of the war. The work for the Admiralty of the physicist Professor Blackett and his team demonstrated that the use of convoys was successful. Their studies showed that despite received wisdom, the larger the convoy, the smaller percentage losses that would be suffered if attacked, as on average a U-Boat would only sink one ship after making contact with the convoy. Assembling larger convoys would also free escort vessels to form support groups, which could be used to bolster escorts if a convoy came under attack.<sup>10</sup> This idea found particular favour with Admiral Horton of Western Approaches command, but it was not until September 1942 that the first escort group capable of specifically hunting down a detected U-Boat was formed.<sup>11</sup>

The Royal Navy was initially lacking in ships available to carry out convoy escort duties. (A figure of 380 has been quoted as the number of ships needed to provide all convoys with comprehensive protection).<sup>12</sup> The Admiralty had reported in 1938 that it did not have enough vessels suitable for escort duty and the suggestion had been made to develop a type of ship for the role which would cost half as much as a destroyer.<sup>13</sup> This resulted in the construction of Flower class corvettes, which bore the brunt of escort duties in wartime. Despite the original design being intended for coastal escort work, the ships eventually became the standard ocean-going escort. Unfortunately for the corvette's crews, the ships were not ideally suited for such duties, lacking the manoeuvrability or speed to catch U-boats on the surface, whilst being prone to pitching and rolling in heavy seas.

As well as corvettes, the Royal Navy possessed a number of old-pattern destroyers which had been converted for escort work. From 1941 onwards these were supplemented by the

newly built Hunt class destroyers. Under an arrangement allowing the United States to use British bases, the navy had also obtained 50 fleet destroyers of World War One vintage. These were converted for use as convoy escorts.<sup>14</sup> In addition to these anti-submarine tactics was the use of aircraft.

As noted above, in the First World War a coordinated anti-submarine strategy had emerged, which eventually included the use of air patrols. After a somewhat shaky start at the outbreak of the Second World War the use of aircraft was integrated into convoy protection. The result of this was to bring about the destruction of 147 U-Boats by aircraft of the RAF's Coastal Command by the end of the war in Europe.<sup>15</sup> This is the strategic and tactical background. How this was portrayed in film will now be considered, focusing on films made during the war which take convoy protection as their subject.

The Introduction to the present study noted the way in which naval war films have a distinctive feature, namely the amalgam of warlike and domestic aspects. Jeanine Basinger<sup>16</sup>, and Jonathan Rayner<sup>17</sup> refer to this characteristic, yet neither fully develops the discourse in the way that the present study does. This is achieved by placing the warlike/domestic amalgam alongside an analysis of wartime masculinity, attitudes to social class and to 'the enemy'.

The role of convoy escorts forms the basis of the narrative of the 1940 Ealing production *CONVOY*. As the film opens with an account of the destruction of a U-Boat and the taking of prisoners whilst on patrol the audience is given a reassuring sense of fighting back against the enemy, to ensure that the Atlantic lifeline remains intact. This idea of fighting back is an important one.

Convoy escort duty is largely defensive in nature. Showing (or making reference to) elements of direct action served to give assurances to an audience that losses were being inflicted on the enemy, and not just being endured by the Allies. This counters the impression given by some early war films that Britain excelled in calm acceptance of suffering and hardship, whilst making scant reference to actively fighting back. This clearly would have had an adverse effect in terms of propaganda, particularly in impressing Britain's war aims and war-fighting capacity on an American audience.<sup>18</sup>

Michael Balcon had been motivated to approach the Ministry of Information and the Admiralty after hearing on the wireless an account of an attack on a convoy. Given his explanation of the patriotic message that his proposed film would portray, the Admiralty were very forthcoming with support. This extended to facilitating filming on board a destroyer on

active convoy duty.<sup>19</sup> As the production had to fulfill commercial requirements as well, it includes a sub-plot involving three of the central characters in the film, Captain Armitage, his wife, and Cranford, a Lieutenant newly posted to Armitage's command, the *Apollo*. This sets the film apart from later, more realistically-based productions, and links it back to the conventions of pre-war film-making.

In other respects too, the narrative adopts conventions familiar from pre-war productions. On the mess deck the men are a mix of working class 'types' with cheeky cockneys to the fore. Barr comments on the links to the tone of Ealing's pre-war output and notes that the stark separation and hierarchy of rank and classes could not be swept aside immediately.<sup>20</sup> This portrayal does not descend entirely into showing the men as stereotypes. Indeed, Murphy suggests that the liveliness of the portrayal of the mess deck characters offers a satisfying contrast to the formality of the wardroom characters.<sup>21</sup>

The film manages to press home its primary message-that trade routes are of paramount importance and must be protected-without overstating the case. In line with the Ministry of Information's Programme for Propaganda, the need for sacrifice to ensure victory is explained.<sup>22</sup> This is shown in early references to cancelling leave in order to mount further operations, and continues through Armitage's determination not to detach a vessel to assist the supposedly stricken merchant ship *Sea Flower*. The idea is developed through Armitage's explanation to the merchant-man's captain that the preservation of the whole convoy has to take precedence over individuals. The audience is presented with the idea that the convoy must get through, regardless of the level of sacrifice. The film also contains a political dimension appropriate to the time of its production. The *Sea Flower* has a number of refugees on board. The ship's captain, Eckersley refers to the likely fate of these people if they had remained in Europe, namely that they would have been consigned to concentration camps. As might be expected, the manner in which the enemy is portrayed tends towards the reinforcement of this political dimension.

The commander of U-37 displays a slavish observance of Hitler's policies, and is demonstrably heartless as he shrugs off concerns that there are not enough lifeboats for the refugees to use once *Sea Flower* has been sunk. This cruelty and callousness is contrasted with the humane nature of the Britons, to the extent that part of the German 'Trojan Horse' use of *Sea Flower* is designed to exploit it. The British display a particular kind of masculinity, based on the notion of 'chivalry' or 'gentlemanliness'. Pervasive in pre-war society, centred on the idealisation of medieval chivalric behaviour, a 'public school' code of gentlemanly conduct

emerged, which still dominated in films made in the early part of the war.<sup>23</sup> This is seen to be in direct opposition to the conduct of the Germans, developing a particular attitude towards them.

On the film's release the romantic triangle involving Armitage was the subject of wry observation. *The Documentary News Letter* made such comment, but still praised the accuracy of the production in terms of showing naval etiquette.<sup>24</sup> Other reviewers were less reserved in their praise. The *Daily Mirror* in particular believed it to be "wonderful propaganda".<sup>25</sup> Audiences were also receptive. In fact, the film was to become the most successful British production of 1940. This is evidence of the disparity often found between the highbrow critical perspective, and the popular response, shown in box-office receipts.

The Ministry of Information commissioned its own documentary film about escort work and convoy protection in 1941. Entitled *CORVETTES*, the film is intended to emphasise that maritime trade routes are being actively protected, and by the use of an innovative new design of ship. This links to one of the key features of the Ministry of Information's wartime policy on films, namely 'how Britain fights'.

The film does not shy away from depicting the hazards and hardships of convoy escort duty on board a corvette. Even transporting food from the galley to the wardroom is shown as requiring the skill to negotiate an open deck, whilst braving heavy seas and foul weather. The film also conveys something of the principles of 'The People's War' by showing both wardroom and mess deck engaged in the same basic task, and facing the same hardships.

The daily routine and the domestic detail (preparing food) seen in combination with intense activity gives the balance of characteristics seen in wartime British masculinity, as Sonya Rose notes. (Rose suggests that wartime masculinity was formed from an 'amalgam' of "post-First World War 'anti-heroic' masculinity and...the seemingly antithetical...ones...exemplified by combat soldiers").<sup>26</sup> This is something which is seen in many other war films with a maritime subject. For example in *MERCHANT SEAMEN*, which will be considered in a later chapter, the merchant navy crew go about their mundane domestic tasks yet ultimately bring about the destruction of a U-boat. In *CLOSE QUARTERS* (which will also be considered later) as well as scenes of domesticity (toast and crossword puzzles) the submarine carries out a successful war patrol and destroys an enemy dock. This serves to emphasise the 'active' component of wartime masculinity as suggested by Sonya Rose. It also acts as a reminder of the characteristic way that 'warlike' and 'domestic' functions aboard ship are combined in one space. In addition, because *CORVETTES* shows the unrewarded routine, citing the hours when

nothing happens, the wartime ideal of sacrifice in the cause of the greater good (in this case, numbing routine endured as long as the convoy survives) is introduced. Again, this is in line with the policy of the Ministry of Information, in showing the need for individual sacrifice in the pursuit of the common aim of defeating the enemy.<sup>27</sup>

Made with the co-operation of the Air Ministry, and following on from the Bomber Command focused *TARGET FOR TONIGHT*, the Crown Film Unit production *COASTAL COMMAND* appeared in October 1942. In order to demonstrate the active war-fighting capacity of Coastal Command, the film shows a variety of aircraft involved in convoy protection operations—Sunderlands, Beauforts, and Catalinas—engaged in aggressive operations against surface raiders, U-Boats and enemy aircraft. Made in the drama-documentary style of *TARGET FOR TONIGHT*, the narrative, acted by a non-professional cast, centres on the crew of a Sunderland flying boat, T for Tommy.

The film portrays the crew acting in concert to achieve a common goal, displaying the consensus that the Ministry of Information sought to promote. Therefore, whilst each is able to act independently, they work together as a team to meet the demands of the operation. In addition, whilst differences in social class are denoted by accent—the skipper has an accent more influenced by Received Pronunciation, for example, as befits his seniority in rank—there is little sense of a division between 'the leader' and 'the led'. This use of accent to suggest social class or status is a common device, and one, it has been argued, that ties-into the overall aim of developing the idea of a 'People's War'. Regional and national variety is demonstrated, and by using the voices of 'ordinary' people as well as those from more elevated positions, the needs of encouraging consensus are served.<sup>28</sup> The film goes further in demonstrating the spirit of consensus in wartime by showing close collaboration between different services. The Operations Room is shared by both senior RAF and RN officers. This shows how combined action against surface raiders and U-Boats is the central feature of convoy protection strategy, and by showing the deployment of significant resources serves to emphasise the vital importance of ensuring the safety of merchant shipping.

Similar to *CORVETTES*, and intended to promote the role of the Royal Canadian Navy, a National Film Board production *CORVETTE PORT ARTHUR* was released in 1943. The film was made as part of the Canada Carries On series, but was released by United Artists as part of the World in Action series. This international release offered the chance to vigorously show

the wartime objectives of the Allied nations.

The film was a re-working of a production entitled *ACTION STATIONS* made by Joris Ivens in 1942.<sup>29</sup> Showing the arduous nature of convoy escort duty, the film culminates in the corvette attacking and forcing a U-Boat to the surface. It is notable for managing to cover in 22 minutes several of the themes common to wartime productions. The role of both crew and officers is shown, with equal time devoted to each. The depiction of collective action runs through the production. The role of the United Nations allied against Germany is also emphasised. The film even manages to suggest a 'hearth and home' aspect to the narrative, by using the voice-over to introduce thoughts of life at home whilst the crew endures the harsh conditions on the Murmansk convoy route. As earlier wartime films displayed vestiges of a previous code of masculine conduct, so later films came to display what Sonya Rose has termed 'temperate masculinity'.<sup>30</sup> The home-loving, good-humoured, 'ordinary' (almost anti-heroic) aspects of masculinity are emphasised, standing in sharp contrast to the kind of masculinity displayed by 'the enemy', that of a swaggering, hyper-masculine and aggressive kind. The difference is reinforced by scenes of domestic activity in *CORVETTES* and *CORVETTE PORT ARTHUR* and, in the case of *CORVETTES*, ratings caring for the ship's mascot and her kittens. Additionally, the domestic space and the warlike space are shown combined, notably in *CORVETTE PORT ARTHUR*, where shots of seamen off-watch in the foc'sle are accompanied by the narrator's comments on the men's desire to destroy U-boats.

Wartime films on the subject of trade protection were made with the intention of reassuring their audiences. By concentrating on the vessels and their crews on convoy escort work, and by containing reference to domestic activity – ratings caring for animals, food preparation – the films manage to give a more human and individual relevance to the strategy developed to counter the actions of surface raiders and U-boats, reinforcing the message that supplies would continue to get through, irrespective of the hardships encountered. Pertinent to the idea of the 'People's War' is the way that the narratives also contain insights into the propagandist requirements of wartime. It has been suggested that the idea of 'temperate' masculinity was bound up with notions of national identity, and so served to emphasise how innate 'Britishness' was the polar opposite of the national identity of the enemy, which was revealed as hyper-masculine and aggressive.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, films made in the post-war period have different emphases, which will be considered in greater detail later. The next chapter will go on to consider how the wartime role of the Merchant Navy was portrayed on film, and how the themes

outlined in the present chapter were used in the context of the contribution made by the merchant service.

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- 1 Correlli Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely* (London, 2001), p.440
  - 2 Ibid. p.45
  - 3 Ibid. p.576
  - 4 Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory-Britain 1900-1990* (London,1997) .p.201
  - 5 David MacGregor, 'The Use, Misuse, and Non-Use of History, The Royal Navy and the Operational Lessons of the First World War', *The Journal of Military History* 56, 4 (1992) ,603-616, p.604
  - 6 Correlli Barnett , *Engage the Enemy*, p.316
  - 7 David MacGregor , 'The Use, Misuse, and Non-Use of History' , pp.604-605
  - 8 Ibid. p.605
  - 9 B.B.Schofield,'The Defeat of the U-Boats during World War II', *Journal of Contemporary History* 16, 1 (1981), 119-129, p.120
  - 10 Ibid.p.124
  - 11 Correlli Barnett , *Engage the Enemy*, p.481
  - 12 B.B.Schofield,'The Defeat of the U-Boats', pp. 119-129
  - 13 Correlli Barnett , *Engage the Enemy*, p.52
  - 14 Ibid. p.184
  - 15 John Buckley, 'Air Power and the Battle of the Atlantic 1939-45', *Journal of Contemporary History* 28, 1 (1993), 143-161,p.143
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  - 17 Jonathan Rayner, *The Naval War Film-Genre, History, National Cinema* ( Manchester, 2007)
  - 18 Roger Manvell, *Films and the Second World War* (South Brunswick and New York, USA, 1974), pp.79-80,83
  - 19 S.P.MacKenzie, *British War Films 1939-1945,The Cinema and the Services* (London, 2006), p.66
  - 20 Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios* (London,1993), p.23
  - 21 Robert Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War* ( London, 2000), p.24
  - 22The National Archives Learning Curve *Focus on Film* (online). Available from <http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/focuson/film/activities/world-war-2/1.1-propaganda-sources-pc.htm> (Accessed 20 June 2008)
  - 23 Andrew Spicer, *Typical Men , Representation of Masculinity in Popular British Culture* (London, 2001), p.8
  - 24Robert Murphy, *British Cinema*,p.23
  - 25 S.P.MacKenzie, *British War Films*,p.67
  - 26 Sonya O. Rose , 'Temperate Heroes', p.177
  - 27The National Archives Learning Curve *Focus on Film* (online). Available from <http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/focuson/film/activities/world-war-2/1.1-propaganda-sources-pc.htm> (Accessed 20 June 2008)
  - 28 Jo Fox, 'Millions like Us? Accented Language and the 'Ordinary' in British Films of the Second World War', *Journal of British Studies* 45,4 (2006), 819-845,p.826
  - 29 William Goetz, 'The Canadian Wartime Documentary, "Canada Carries on" and "The World In Action" ',*Cinema Journal* 16, 2 (1977), 59-80,p.73
  - 30 Sonya O. Rose, 'Temperate Heroes', p.186
  - 31 Ibid.p.192

## THE MERCHANT NAVY AND THE CONVOY SYSTEM

At the commencement of the war, merchant shipping had been put under the control of the Ministry of Shipping (later the Ministry of War Transport).<sup>1</sup> Co-ordination of the supply of available shipping was the responsibility of the Ministry, whilst individual shipping companies retained ownership of vessels. This led to variations in working conditions between employers. (The official history notes that in assessing the contribution of the merchant service to the war effort, 300 shipping companies had been approached for access to their records. This number of different companies would almost certainly have meant an inevitable variation in conditions of service).<sup>2</sup> Controversially, once a ship had been sunk, the seaman was deemed to have lost rights to pay thereafter. This situation prevailed until the institution of an Essential Work Order for the Merchant Navy in 1941.<sup>3</sup>

The intention of the Order was to try and reverse the trend of decline in numbers of merchant seamen, who could obtain better working conditions in other war industries. The Order created 'The Pool' system, which directed a discharged seaman to the next available ship, should the current ship owner not immediately re-engage his services. Whilst this system was not popular at its inception, it did have some advantages. It offered continuity of employment, guaranteed leave, and pay whilst between engagements.<sup>4</sup> In addition, some Merchant seamen worked under the direct control of the Royal Navy, on armed merchant cruisers (like the famous *Jervis Bay*) and similar auxiliary vessels. They were bound by one of the T124 type of agreements, placing them under naval discipline. At the outbreak of war around 50 merchant ships were taken over and converted to carry guns, with the intention of using the ships for escort duties, and for blockade operations.<sup>5</sup>

As the preceding chapter described, keeping the Atlantic trade routes open was absolutely central to the British war effort, and the vital factor in the Battle of the Atlantic was the balance between tonnage losses and rate of ship construction, numbers of U-boats destroyed and replacements built, U-boat crewmen lost against merchant seamen killed. This is what has been termed the "grim accountancy of comparative losses".<sup>6</sup>

At the war's end the human cost on this balance-sheet was more than 30,000 British

merchant seamen drowned or killed in action. These losses were suffered by a service that totalled only 120,000 British mariners in June 1942, a figure, according to the official history, equivalent to around 8 army divisions.<sup>7</sup> This level of loss has been estimated as a rate of 17%, higher than that of any of the fighting services.<sup>8</sup>

Richard Hough's survey of the war at sea<sup>9</sup> contains several accounts of the routine hardships and dangers experienced, and of the effects of U-boat attack on a convoy. One such account, of a night attack on a convoy early in 1943 neatly sums up the experience of many seafarers.

"The unfortunate ship which had been hit was loaded with iron ore and sank within minutes...we passed survivors who were scattered in the icy water... Some were on rafts, some were alone, but no boats had survived. It is my most painful memory of the war that we had to shout encouragement, knowing well that it was unlikely that they would ever be picked up."<sup>10</sup>

Famously, the *Daily Mirror* highlighted these circumstances by printing a cartoon with a Merchant Navy subject on 5th March 1942. By Philip Zec, it showed a shipwrecked man, clinging to a raft, with the caption: 'The price of petrol has been increased by one penny-official'. The purpose was to criticise profiteering, but the government interpreted it differently, and threatened to close down the newspaper.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the interpretation, as a visual image the cartoon manages to vividly sum up the risks inherent in service with the Merchant Navy.

It was against this background that a number of films appeared which featured the work of the Merchant Navy, reflecting some of the dangers faced in ensuring supplies continued to get through. The present chapter will develop the discussion of the warlike/domestic amalgam, and will consider how this links to the ideas on gender established by Sonya Rose. In addition, the chapter will indicate how film portrayals of the 'People's War' were not wholly inclusive, insofar as the representation of non-white characters is concerned. Moreover, the dearth of films made post-war which place the merchant service to the fore is noted, as it is something not fully addressed in previous studies.

*FOR FREEDOM* was released in May 1940. Whilst not centering its narrative on the work of the Merchant Navy, it is nonetheless noteworthy for the inclusion of the fate of the merchant

ship *Africa Shell*, which had been sunk by the surface raider *Graf Spee*, itself later scuttled at Montevideo.

*FOR FREEDOM* uses Captain Dove of *Africa Shell* to recreate the events of his own capture. What might potentially have been a reminder to the audience of setbacks in the early days of the war is instead transformed into a depiction of the indomitable national character. The captain calmly destroys his ship's confidential papers before the German boarding party can take them. He then proceeds to insist that he be allowed to take his golf clubs with him when he is transferred to captivity on *Graf Spee*. Dove continues to offer resistance in his own fashion by insisting on writing out an official protest once he is on board the German ship.

All-in-all, Captain Dove's spirit helps reinforce the idea of fighting back in whatever way possible, at a time when there was little good news to celebrate. He also is an emblem of civilian resistance against the enemy, which shows the merchant service in a very positive light. He is shown as facing, unarmed, much the same risks as any other individual in frontline service. This gently introduces one aspect of the 'People's War', namely that everyone is on active duty, combatant or civilian. In addition, Dove embodies the 'temperate' masculinity which Sonya Rose suggests typifies wartime Britain.<sup>12</sup> His good-humour and decency is combined with a combative nature—albeit constrained by being unarmed—shown in his resistance to the enemy. He displays the balance of attributes necessary to the 'temperate' man, and, given that he is from the merchant service, demonstrates the influence of this notion of masculinity on all parts of wartime society, whether civilian or military.

In *CONVOY* the narrative is not based entirely on the Merchant Navy, but the service nevertheless features prominently. The merchant service is represented by Captain Eckersley of *Sea Flower*. He is, however, held up to some degree of criticism. His independent spirit in refusing to sail within the convoy is shown as presenting all manner of difficulties, both for the escorts and for the other merchant ships. In this way, the narrative can broach the subject of the absolute necessity of working in co-operation to ensure the safe passage of the convoy. In other regards, his spirited character is shown more positively, in a way reminiscent of the treatment of Captain Dove described above. The Merchant Navy in general is also praised by the convoy escort commander, who is at pains to point out to his junior officers that, whilst appearances might suggest otherwise, they are all 'master mariners'.

For its part the Ministry of Information had been concerned to depict the importance of the work of the Merchant and Royal Navies in the Battle of the Atlantic since April of 1941. The

Ministry had to try to show the realities of service in the Merchant Navy without discouraging seamen from continuing to sign on. In addition, the vital nature of the work had to be emphasised, both to the seafarers and to the wider public.<sup>13</sup> The Films Division of the Ministry of Information managed to release a production 'off the shelf' which highlighted the role of the Merchant Navy. *MERCHANT SEAMEN* had been made by the Crown Film Unit in 1940, with its main purpose being to promote gunnery courses for seamen on merchant vessels. This film depicted the sinking of a merchant ship, an event which inspires one of the survivors to undertake a gunnery course, resulting in the sinking of a U-Boat on his next voyage.<sup>14</sup>

Despite its short time span and some rather stilted sequences that try and 'sell' the idea of gunnery training, the film nevertheless contains many of the elements familiar from longer productions. These features combine to make the film an interesting one in its own right. Straightaway, the narrative emphasises the idea of the 'best of the national character'. This is displayed in scenes shot in the foc'sle, which provides the setting for good humoured bantering (and also develops the idea of male bonding, and the homosocial world of the ship).<sup>15</sup> The foc'sle itself is realistically shabby and cramped, and the characters (significantly, non-professionals) are from a variety of age groups and different regions.

The narrative therefore shows some of the ideals of the 'People's War' which the Ministry of Information was eager to project. The regional variety and the good humoured acceptance of circumstances show the nation acting in concert for the greater good. The central figure-Nipper—who takes the gunnery course and is in the gun crew that eventually destroys the U-Boat also serves to stand for the national fighting spirit. These elements make the film 'good propaganda' in the terms set by the Ministry.

The film would also appear to have rekindled interest in the subject of the Merchant Navy as a propaganda topic.<sup>16</sup> A further short film about the role of the Merchant Navy (made by Realist) was released in 1942, entitled *A SEAMAN'S STORY*. This was in the form of an interview with a merchant seaman from Newfoundland, who had been torpedoed four times. The sailor describes the level of hardship suffered, and the attempts made to reach a safe haven on each occasion. As in *CORVETTE PORT ARTHUR* the inclusion of people from a different part of the empire is significant. It points to the broadening of the 'People's War' idea to encompass an idea of a 'People's Empire' as well. In this way, the empire was portrayed as different nations united by a set of common beliefs—liberty and justice, standing in contrast to the way in which Nazi Germany was bent on acquiring territory through conquest and aggression.<sup>17</sup>

Another commercial feature from Ealing, *SAN DEMETRIO LONDON* appeared in 1943. The film was inspired by a real incident which had happened earlier in the war, before the withdrawal of U-Boats ordered by Doenitz. On November 5th 1940, convoy HX84, consisting of 37 ships, but with only one armed merchant cruiser, the *Jervis Bay*, as escort, was attacked by the pocket battleship *Admiral Scheer*. The *Jervis Bay* was sunk in a brave attempt to take on the *Admiral Scheer*, whilst the *San Demetrio*, an oil tanker, was badly damaged and set on fire, causing her crew to abandon ship. After taking to the ship's boats, part of her crew eventually re-boarded the *San Demetrio*, and managed to steer the crippled vessel back to the Clyde.

*SAN DEMETRIO, LONDON* marked a shift towards a greater 'realism' in production. Balcon had originally made the distinction between 'realism' and 'tinsel' in a lecture of 1943, given to the Film Workers' Association in Brighton <sup>18</sup>, using the disparaging term 'tinsel' to stand for purely escapist content. Ealing had already embraced the documentary-influenced style of Calvacanti and others, as was shown in the realist propaganda films *THE FOREMAN WENT TO FRANCE* and *THE NEXT OF KIN* in 1942. Charles Barr <sup>19</sup> describes how this realistic approach combined 'situation' (often a group under great pressure), 'people' (regional and class variety, depicted unpatronisingly), and 'mood' (shown in the balance between humour and professionalism). These are all displayed in *SAN DEMETRIO LONDON*.

Ealing obtained the co-operation of the Admiralty in making *SAN DEMETRIO*, once their Lordships had been satisfied with how the actions of the *Jervis Bay* would be portrayed. In fact, the level of assistance even extended to defending the production from Churchill's criticisms, who disliked the idea of film portraying the sinking of a British ship.<sup>20</sup>

In *SAN DEMETRIO*, the thrust of the narrative serves to demonstrate national and international unity, drawing together the regions of Britain, and incorporating an American as well. The best features of a presumed national character are demonstrated with understatement and good humour. Humour is shown in the incident (amongst others) of a crew member's lost false teeth, which is met with a colleague's offer to lend him his set. The use of humour is pitched differently to the way in which it is shown in pre-war films. The 'lower deck' can now use good humour to display an indomitable spirit, instead of merely seeming to be clowns. This is a feature of 'The People's War', the mobilisation of all sectors of society in the common cause of defeating the enemy.

Notably, the *San Demetrio's* captain does not form part of the group which re-boards the vessel. Inspiration and decisions on the fate of the survivors must therefore come from within

the group, not from reliance on the captain as sole leader. By means of their actions—the Chief Engineer taking his turn to re-start the ship's pumps, and the Second Officer's taking a part in the fire-fighting bucket chain—the 'all-in-it-together' mood is once again emphasised. Individuals also take action on their own initiative. The mess steward hunts down food and condensed milk, 'Yank' volunteers to treat the engineer's injured hand. Neither has to wait for direct orders from those holding senior rank. The film also demonstrates the wartime notion of portraying harmony and common purpose across society by reflecting a variety of regions of the nation. There are Scots and Welsh amongst the crew, as well as the more generic 'cockney' working-class characters familiar from other films of the time.

It could be said then that a more democratic air prevails on board the merchant navy vessel, notwithstanding the necessarily hierarchical structure created by rank. This is demonstrated in two incidents. Firstly, when the Second Officer gives the men the pros and cons of re-boarding the tanker, and encourages the men to decide what action is for the best and secondly when he asks the men to decide which course to set once the Chief Engineer has re-started the ship's engines. The viewer therefore sees another important tenet of wartime output, in the operation of the group working together harmoniously for the greater good.

The narrative also allows for another feature of wartime productions by including a role for allied nations, in this case the USA. This importance is emphasised visually, in dockside scenes of tanks and other war materials being loaded on other ships in the convoy. As the film is set prior to the entry of the US into the war, the character 'Yank' has to be allowed to pretend to be Canadian to join the crew, but his presence in the shipboard community provides a reminder of the links between Britain and the USA in fighting the war. 'Yank' can also comment directly on the fighting spirit of Britain, serving to reinforce the principle of demonstrating the best of the nation's character emerging through adversity.

The film attempts to show an active role for the merchant service over and above that of crewing vital merchant convoys. The *San Demetrio* has its own deck-gun, and while the crew observes the *Admiral Scheer* firing they are demonstrably eager to fire back. Links to a maritime fighting tradition are included in the unlikely setting of a game of darts in the foc'sle. The score required is 111, which one of the crew terms a 'Nelson'. This serves to draw attention to the Nelsonian naval tradition, and links the merchant service directly to it. (This is a feature of the earlier film, *CONVOY* as well. Captain Eckersley refers to Nelson's prayer before Trafalgar when he is engaged in 'debate' with the U-Boat officer who has taken him prisoner).

Perhaps understandably, given the plot of the film, there is no significant role for women in the narrative. Reference to 'home' is made, however. Women are part of this 'hearth and home' referencing, as reminders of the normal features of life, and what the nation is fighting to preserve. One of the crewmen reinforces this, by recollecting home life ("...when I'm home the missus shuts up shop..and we go off to the pictures.."). As noted in the previous chapter, there are other aspects to this kind of referencing. These concern the idea of masculinity being expressed in wartime Britain in a 'temperate' way, which became indicative of 'good citizenship' and the best of the national character as well.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, there are indications of the nature of total war, and of the idea of equality of sacrifice expressed in concerns about families ashore enduring bombing raids.

Notably the enemy is only shown in terms of the effect of their actions, not as individual figures carrying them out. The viewer sees the effect of shelling on the *Jervis Bay* on the *San Demetrio*, but there are no scenes from the German perspective. Charles Barr<sup>22</sup> suggests that this is as a consequence of the film being produced in the latter part of the war, when a more confident mood prevailed, meaning that the enemy are simply 'there', instead of being portrayed as figures for the audience to actively dislike. Rather, as the narrative progresses, the enemy becomes the fire on the tanker, the foul weather conditions and the hardships to be endured in attempting to bring the vessel to port. In some regards, this can be seen to prefigure the post-war film *THE CRUEL SEA* takes a similar approach to portraying 'the enemy'.

*SAN DEMETRIO* received critical praise on release. *The Times* of January 6th 1944<sup>23</sup>, for example, noted the film's "sober realism". *The Guardian* of January 7th 1944<sup>24</sup> thought that as a retelling of the *Jervis Bay* action, it made "an absorbing drama". However, as James Chapman notes, changes in audience tastes led to low returns at the box-office. Gainsborough costume-based melodramas for example, had overtaken war films in terms of box-office popularity from 1943. Chapman cites comments made by W.J. Speakman at the 1944 BFI Conference, who said that the viewing public, due to war weariness, much preferred escapist entertainment.<sup>25</sup>

As described before, The Ministry of Information had sufficient interest in using the merchant service as a topic to take note of an initial proposal which was to become *WESTERN APPROACHES*.<sup>26</sup> Production would, however, turn out to be extremely difficult, for a variety of reasons. The film was shot entirely at sea, save for one scene. As well as the more obvious difficulties this presented, there was also the issue of obtaining facilities, given the shortages of ships and personnel. In addition, the Admiralty, according to the account contained in S.P.

MacKenzie's study,<sup>27</sup> proved to be un-cooperative when approached for assistance. The Admiralty eventually provided some facilities, notably in allowing the filming of *HMS Graph*, a captured U-Boat. As a consequence it was not until November 1944 that the film was released.

Using a non-professional cast, the plot of the film concerns the survivors of a torpedoed merchant ship, the *Jason*. After taking to the ship's boat, the survivors are shadowed by the U-Boat which has sunk their ship, which is using them to lure any rescuers from the ship *Leander* to a similar fate. The survivors are shown in the ship's boat, enduring hardship with fortitude and good humour. In this way, the film displays some of those aspects of 'national character' which made for the ideal of 'good propaganda' during wartime.

The film places regional variety to the forefront, demonstrating this through the accents of the men on screen. Accent is also linked in some respects to rank or to a position in the naval hierarchy. Notably, as in *SAN DEMETRIO*, this is less pronounced when considering the merchant vessel. By contrast, on board the Royal Navy ship accent seems much more closely allied to rank and hierarchical position. In each instance, however, 'difference' is not seen as causing division, but rather as part of the promotion of common purpose implicit in the creation of a 'People's War'.<sup>28</sup> The democratic spirit implied by 'The People's War' is also shown in the way in which the captain of the *Jason* acts, once the crew has taken to the boat. At the start he is literally at the helm, and so directly in control. Later, his calm demeanour and reasoning for not alerting *Leander* to their presence (for fear that the U-boat which has trailed them will also be alerted) helps quell a slightly mutinous mood amongst the boat's occupants. It seems apparent that authority in this democratised setting is based not on hierarchy or on social class, but rather on recognition of technical and professional skills and experience (something which the captain's own actions underscore, as it is 'Sparks'—the radio operator — who sends out the distress calls).

It is interesting that the film shows the enemy — the U-Boat crew — in a reasonably sympathetic manner. There are, to be sure, references to survivors having been strafed, but the submariners are not shown in a stereotyped way. The U-Boat crew is shown much differently from the crew depicted in an earlier production, *49TH PARALLEL*. In that film, as Murphy notes, the crew (and their leader, played by Eric Portman, in particular) is used to demonstrate that Nazi ideology is crass and brutal.<sup>29</sup> Wartime interrogation notes, perhaps unsurprisingly, concur in part with this view of the political beliefs of U-Boat crews. For example, in the report on U-454 in August 1943, the captain is described as being 'non-political', whereas in contrast the second

officer is declared to be "a fanatical National Socialist". Similarly, the report on U-73 from February 1944 states that the captain "gave the impression of being a fanatical Nazi".<sup>30</sup>

In another departure from the stereotypical approach, the U-Boat crew is heard speaking in German, subtitled for the audience. This adds a touch of realism which is in marked difference to the tendency noted in earlier films (for example Ealing's feature *CONVOY*) for foreign characters to speak what has been termed 'cinema Esperanto'<sup>31</sup>. The narrative even allows for the audience to note the crew's technical skills. In this way, the submariners are shown to be worthy adversaries as opposed to one-dimensional stock characters.

Given the nature of the narrative, and as is evidenced in *SAN DEMETRIO*, it is perhaps not surprising that there is only a very limited role for women in the film. Therefore WRNS are shown working in the plotting room at Western Approaches Command, and taking details of signals to be sent to the convoy. Other than this, women feature only in references to 'home'. The Petty Officer gunner on *Leander* comments that he has never been home for his wedding anniversary, whilst one of the *Jason*'s crew reminisces about meeting his wife on his birthday. Again, as in *SAN DEMETRIO LONDON*, references to 'home' allow for the inclusion of an indication of what is at stake in the war whilst suggesting a particular version of masculine conduct as well, namely, the good-natured and home-loving 'temperate' man, representative of all that stands in opposition to the hyper-masculine and aggressive enemy.<sup>32</sup>

*WESTERN APPROACHES'* delayed release led the Film Division press officer, JD Griggs to comment that the film would have been an easier prospect to market if it had been released at the peak of the Battle of the Atlantic. However, he also noted that the film still ought to meet with approval. In order to try and offset some of the effects of a belated release, special viewings involving prominent individuals were arranged. This tactic appears to have borne fruit as the film received good reviews. *The Times* of November 10th 1944<sup>33</sup> praised the realism of the production, especially the use of non-professional actors, and the way that the idea of preserving the convoy lies at the heart of things, irrespective of the effect such action has on individuals. The *Manchester Guardian* reviewer on November 18th 1944<sup>34</sup> also praised the film, and reminded readers that the film depicted a battle (the Battle of the Atlantic) that was still being fought. In so doing, the contemporary and continuing relevance of the events portrayed would have been impressed on the viewer.

With portrayals of the merchant service central to their narratives, *MERCHANT SEAMEN*, *SAN DEMETRIO LONDON* and *WESTERN APPROACHES* contain elements common to naval

films made in the course of World War Two. There is the combination of the 'domestic' and the 'active' that is typical of naval war films. There is the depiction of regional variety, the idea of setting aside individual needs for a common goal, the part played by Allied nations, a more meritocratic (or possibly democratic) approach to rank and hierarchy; individuals know their obligations and carry out their duties with a quiet good humour. As suggested by Sonya Rose, the idea of a 'temperate' and good-humoured masculinity was all-pervasive, a code adopted by combatant and civilian, men and women alike.<sup>35</sup> However just as naval war films are notable for combining the 'warlike' and the 'domestic', a similar balance of attributes is necessary in wartime British masculinity. Therefore the 'temperate' version of masculinity contains traditionally warlike attributes. Showing a civilian service—the Merchant Navy—displaying these attributes is significant. Merchant seamen are shown in close proximity to the enemy, and facing great risk. By conducting themselves in the way that they do serves to reinforce Sonya Rose's idea of the influence of 'temperate' masculinity on society as a whole, civilian or combatant.

The films depict the need for convoys to get through as being essential to achieving victory. There is also the idea that such success will depend on individual courage and sacrifice, in the execution of a common aim. This courage and sacrifice will be to the extent shown in *SAN DEMETRIO* when the crew re-boards the ship, ignoring the risk of fires and exploding cargo. It will also be to the extent of foregoing one's own rescue to preserve the safety of others, as seen in *WESTERN APPROACHES*. From the earlier canon of films, there is the need to take the fight to the enemy. The overall desire to 'fight back' (notably the destruction of a U-Boat in *MERCHANT SEAMEN*) also points to a more active kind of masculinity forming the balance to the 'domestic' aspects often seen in a naval setting. In propaganda terms these factors reinforced the aims of the Ministry of Information mentioned before, showing the 'British character' and 'toughness of fibre', the extent of the war effort and the need for sacrifices to be made.

It is notable however, that in showing diversity, there is one major omission. The Merchant Navy had a long tradition of recruitment from Africa, the Caribbean, the Indian sub-continent and south-east Asia. The official history notes that the service was remarkably eclectic, noting that at the outbreak of the war there were 45,000 Indians and 6,000 Chinese serving.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, in many cases, the use of Indian seamen was seen as a crucial replacement for other seamen who had left the service for the Royal Navy.<sup>37</sup> It would appear then, that while the contribution of

non-white seamen was acknowledged and well-recognised, it was not reflected in film portrayals. The reasons are beyond the scope of the present study but being aware of this shows how the portrayal of social consensus was subject to certain limitations.

There is another point to note concerning films about the Merchant Navy. This is the unfortunate fact that when the post-war situation is considered, there are no films which place the role of the Merchant Navy centre stage. As will be considered later, 1950s films are notable for the way that they shift away from showing the 'People's War', causing the wartime emphasis on the vital role of 'ordinary' people to recede from view. The role of the merchant service neatly reflects the contribution made by 'ordinary' people, but as films shifted to showing the part played by the combat arms, and by officers in particular, there is little scope to show the figures of the war years. Whilst *SEA WIFE* (1957) and the later *MURPHY'S WAR* (1971) feature merchant seamen, neither film is directly concerned with the merchant service in the way that *WESTERN APPROACHES* or *SAN DEMETRIO, LONDON* are. Manvell suggested that in the post-war period films became more concerned to show 'war action stories', using hazardous exploits as the basis of the narrative. Despite what has been noted earlier about the active and crucial role undertaken by the merchant service, it would seem that post-war producers did not believe this was either active or glamorous enough to warrant the making of films about the Merchant Navy.

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5 Brian Lavery, *Hostilities Only. Training the Wartime Royal Navy* (London, 2004), p.248

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12 See Sonya O. Rose, 'Temperate Heroes, Masculinity in Second World War Britain', in Stefan Dudink et al (eds), *Masculinities in Politics and War. Gendering Modern History* (Manchester, 2004), pp.177-195

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- 19 Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios* (London,1993), p.35
- 20 S.P.MacKenzie, *British War Films 1939-1945, The Cinema and the Services* (London, 2006), p.88
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## UNDERSEA WARFARE

At the start of hostilities the role of the Royal Navy's submarines was to contain German surface raiders and U-Boats, by patrolling the North Sea and off Norway, using a strategy that had been adopted during the First World War<sup>1</sup>. By contrast, the primary war-fighting actions would be carried out by the main battle fleet. This led to the emphasis being placed on the construction of capital ships and cruisers able to meet an enemy surface force, which has been viewed by some as a desire to re-fight Jutland.<sup>2</sup> In any event, as far as the Admiralty doctrine of the time was concerned, the role of submarines was purely ancillary.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the lack of emphasis on aggressive action some operational successes were achieved by the Mediterranean Fleet's submarines. Three flotillas, the 1st based at Alexandria, the 8th at Gibraltar, and the 10th at Malta sank 286 enemy vessels between June 1940 and the close of 1944. This totalled 1 million tons of enemy shipping<sup>4</sup>. In addition, 16 Italian submarines and 5 U-Boats were disposed of. These actions in the Mediterranean were a great contribution to the overall strategy in the area by disrupting enemy supply routes to North Africa.

Having established something of the actual nature of wartime operations, the present chapter will consider how such actions were portrayed by film-makers during the war. It has been noted previously how Jonathan Rayner's study<sup>5</sup> draws on the work of Jeanine Basinger on the combat film genre. In developing her argument Jeanine Basinger suggests that most maritime films are too 'domestic'<sup>6</sup> and cannot as a result be considered in the same way as her primary focus, films based on land warfare. The present study has attempted to show how in British films this is not the case, as a significant feature is the balance which is maintained between 'the warlike' and 'the domestic' attributes. The present chapter will aim to show how films set onboard submarines neatly typify this, something which is intensified by the close proximity of life onboard.

Submarines had been used in films before the war. The feature film *MEN LIKE THESE* (1931) had taken submarine operations as its theme, but the heart of the film had been the story – based on real events- of the escape from a damaged and stricken boat. After the outbreak of hostilities, the Admiralty had furnished aid to Movietone News to produce a film about

submarine operations. This involved filming *HMS Thunderbolt* at Alexandria. The finished production *SUBMARINE PATROL* appeared in 1942, and proved something of a surprise success on release<sup>7</sup>. The idea of producing other films highlighting the work of submarines was an attractive one. MacKenzie suggests that the Admiralty was keen to support a film which concentrated on the work of submarines as a means to counterbalance public anxieties about the activities of enemy U-Boats. By making a film showing an operation against a German battleship, it was hoped to imply that British submarines were in reality equally successful<sup>8</sup>.

The project which resulted was *WE DIVE AT DAWN*. This had been first suggested in early 1942, and appeared in 1943. It took the 'wartime wedding' approach, linking feature and documentary methods of film making. This places the production in the canon of war films identified by Manvell like *SAN DEMETRIO LONDON*, which used similar techniques to gain a realistic end product<sup>9</sup>.

The narrative of the film is concerned with the submarine *Sea Tiger*, on operations in the North Sea and the Baltic. The task assigned to the submarine is to locate and sink a new German warship, the *Brandenburg*. (Given that this ship is a surface raider, there is, perhaps, an implication that *Brandenburg* is akin to the *Bismarck*). In carrying out the mission the boat comes under attack itself, and so the crew remains unaware if success has been achieved in sinking the enemy vessel. A diversion to refuel at an enemy occupied port forms a sub-plot on the boat's journey back to home port, where it is discovered that the *Brandenburg* has indeed been sunk.

Extensive facilities were offered to the producers (Gaumont-British) by the Admiralty. These included providing construction plans and spare parts with which to make realistic-seeming interior sets.<sup>10</sup> Maritime advisors were also supplied, to make sure that the cast, amongst other things, appeared suitably dishevelled. The Admiralty added to the realistic tone of the production by enabling the director of *WE DIVE AT DAWN* to film submarine P614 and the submarine depot ship *HMS Forth* at work. MacKenzie notes that P614 had originally been built for the Turkish navy, so for the Admiralty to allow filming would have presented less security concerns, as its specification differed from operational Royal Navy boats.<sup>11</sup>

*WE DIVE AT DAWN* attempts to show characters from both wardroom and lower deck, and to develop their characters equally. Class differences are apparent, demonstrated in part by contrast in domestic circumstances. Whilst John Mills as Lieutenant Taylor is shown as living the playboy's life ashore, complete with manservant, Hobson the hydrophone operator lives in a

terraced house. Class being linked to rank is suggested by Hobson as a Leading Seaman being working class, Taylor as a Lieutenant being certainly upper class, and the petty officers being lower middle class in background. Class and rank are again suggested by use of the 'shorthand' method of accent. Officers tend towards a Received Pronunciation mode of speech, whilst the greatest variety of regional voices is given to the ratings and Petty Officers. This points to the process of generating the idea of a 'People's War' which has been noted before in relation to accented speech.<sup>12</sup>

It is noticeable however, that once onboard *Sea Tiger* rank and hierarchical differences seem blurred. This is possibly attributable to the enforced proximity of life on the boat, and to the necessities of the operation at hand. This serves the purpose of allowing the narrative to demonstrate co-operation and harmony in a common purpose. As the crew contains a Canadian<sup>13</sup>, Scots, an Irishman and a Yorkshireman such regional and national variety can be used to reinforce the idea of 'The People's War'. There is even room to include a better-educated lower deck character, 'Oxford'. Moreover, Hobson is not shown as a stereotypical rating. He demonstrates skill at foreign languages, and this is aside from his evident professional and technical competence as the hydrophone operator (significantly, in films made post-war such ability is seen largely as the preserve of the officers. This is particularly striking in *THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE* where the ratings' 'skill' seems to extend only to supplying muscle power). His regional accent is used to show variety within the crew, not to render him a working-class stereotype as might have been the case in earlier films. Indeed it has been suggested that Asquith's direction serves to reinforce the democratised nature of the submarine's crew, by showing Taylor and Hobson in the same frame at key junctures in the narrative<sup>14</sup>.

*WE DIVE AT DAWN* continues broadly in the vein of *IN WHICH WE SERVE* in its portrayal of women. Women are not shown actively engaged in war work. Rather, they reflect the 'hearth and home'. This is a familiar feature of wartime output, as has been considered earlier in the present study. They are shown, in the case of Hobson's wife, continuing calmly and stoically as news that *Sea Tiger* has been lost is received. (This, of course proves to be untrue, the report resulting from Lieutenant Taylor taking decoy action after attacking the *Brandenburg*). In the case of the landlady of the Trafalgar pub, a robust rebuttal is given to Lord Haw-Haw's report of the loss. Women therefore display the same attitudes as the male characters. They are stoic and calm in adversity and resilient and defiant when things seem to be going badly. Such

character traits again typify the all-in-it-together 'People's War', when all, active combatant or not, are involved in the war effort. Moreover, there is perhaps some indication as well of the extent to which certain masculine traits had become linked to an idea of the 'best of the national character'. This is something Sonya Rose discusses, suggesting that as a consequence of the link between the dominant version of masculinity in wartime, and a general principle of what characteristics defined 'good citizenship', women could exhibit many of the same traits as men.<sup>15</sup>

When the *Sea Tiger* picks up downed Luftwaffe airmen who are sheltering on a survival buoy this is in itself significant. It links back to the primary aim of the film as suggested earlier, which is to show Britain (and more specifically the submarine service) on the offensive. By showing the airmen the implication is that direct action is also being taken against the Luftwaffe, as after all, they have been shot down. Later, the leader of the aircrew adopts a sneering tone with Taylor, and cites observance of International Law. The irony of this is soon demonstrated, when his brutal nature is displayed. One of the aircrew's nerve breaks whilst the submarine negotiates a minefield. The leader viciously attacks him, causing injuries which lead to the man's death. This is in stark contrast to the actions of the submarine crew, who tend the injuries of their prisoners and clothe and feed them from their own scant resources. This further emphasises the idea that British submariners, unlike their enemies, are fighting a 'clean' conflict, with as much honour as is possible in the circumstances. Showing this kind of activity taking place in the same space that is used for combat also serves to emphasise the characteristic mix of 'domestic' and 'warlike' features notable in naval films. It also points to the idea of 'temperate' masculinity (with its characteristic of 'kindliness') which has been noted in a previous chapter, and to the fundamental opposition of British values to those of the hyper-masculine, aggressive Germans. (In each instance, it is significant that balance is achieved—the British sailors are 'temperate', and their submarine is a place where domestic actions take place—but in no sense is their warlike capacity felt to be diminished).

In the case of *WE DIVE AT DAWN* it would seem to be sufficient for the enemy characters to condemn themselves by their actions and attitudes. The Luftwaffe men are therefore shown as variously cringing or vicious and can only maintain a semblance of order through violence and fear. This is further emphasised by contrast with the humane, kindly and disciplined behaviour of the *Sea Tiger's* crewmen. This extends to the torpedo room PO trying to comfort the dying Luftwaffe man, again an action much different to that of the German's own countryman.

Therefore, by offering contrasting codes of masculine conduct, in a relatively subtle manner (certainly without resorting to the heavy-handed means used in the First World War) a particular attitude towards the enemy is developed.

In the latter part of the film the raid on the fuel depot does cause the plot to deviate from a realistic approach. A number of commentators have suggested that this episode is like a 'Boys Own Paper' adventure<sup>16</sup>. No doubt this is to imply that it is melodramatic and implausible. On a more positive note, the incident does enable some elements of characterisation to be elaborated and the 'People's War' theme to be extended. In addition, elements of a more 'active' kind of masculinity—the counterpoint to the 'domestic' aspects of temperate masculinity noted earlier in this study— can be elaborated as well. Therefore, it is Hobson who takes the initiative and persuades Taylor not to scuttle the boat in favour of launching the raid. Furthermore, it is Hobson who takes the greatest risk. Clad in one of the captured Luftwaffe men's uniforms, he goes ashore by himself, and takes an active and decisive independent role. This offers a neat summary of the way a 'People's War' idea had been developed, when compared to the portrayal of working class characters in earlier films. For example, in *SHIPS WITH WINGS* naval ratings are shown purely as servants to the officers, or used to provide comic interludes.

The raid also enables the narrative to feature another aspect familiar from other wartime output. This is the inclusion of other European nations. Accordingly, oil fuel and stores are obtained from an eagerly co-operative Danish captain. In this way, although subject to German occupation, the Danes are seen fighting back, offering resistance ---however limited--- to their oppressors. Characters from European nations can be seen in wartime films both as victims of war (serving to emphasise Nazi brutality -- like the refugees in *CONVOY*, or in *CLOSE QUARTERS* considered below) and also as resisters of oppression. The idea of resistance – either independent, or with British assistance—was common in films made in the middle years of the war<sup>17</sup>, with portrayals of occupied nations fighting back often being foregrounded more than the activities of allied combatants from the USA or Soviet Union,<sup>18</sup> with such characters demonstrating both the consequences of Nazi oppression (which must be defeated) and by acting together in a common cause, showing the stoic will to fight and defeat the oppressor.

MacKenzie speculates that *WE DIVE AT DAWN*'s release was delayed so as not to create too many comparisons with *IN WHICH WE SERVE*.<sup>19</sup> Whether this was in fact the intention or not, the comparisons were nevertheless made. *The Times* review of May 20th 1943 linked the

two films together as 'companion pieces'. The review took the opinion that the film followed in the same tradition, and praised John Mills in particular for creating a tone of authenticity. MacKenzie notes the popular reception of the film, notwithstanding the way in which reviewers drew comparisons with *IN WHICH WE SERVE*.

The reviewers from the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Spectator* followed the lead of the *Times* and praised the film, whilst making the same comparisons. More populist dailies like the *Daily Express* were not as concerned about making the comparisons, and were less qualified in their praise<sup>20</sup>.

*WE DIVE AT DAWN* was followed in 1943 by another submarine film, this time a Crown Film Unit effort, *CLOSE QUARTERS*. As in the case of *WESTERN APPROACHES* a non-professional cast is used, recreating the actions that they carry out in real life, in the same sort of narrative-documentary style. The plot centres on a patrol off the Norwegian coast carried out by HMS *Tyrant* with instructions to locate and destroy enemy shipping, and combines mundane routine on the boat with operational incident. The mission results in a double success. A U-Boat is engaged on the surface and is sunk. An enemy floating dock is also destroyed.

The intention, as with *WE DIVE AT DAWN*, would seem to have been to reinforce confidence in the Royal Navy's capabilities in offensive operations. On the film's preview showing at the Ministry of Information, this intention would appear to have been achieved, at least for the *Times* reviewer. The reviewer believed that the film was a "healthy reminder that our own submarine crews have...since the moment war was declared, carried out their own difficult and dangerous offensive work."<sup>21</sup>

The captain of *Tyrant* is depicted as keen to take the fight to the enemy, but is given clear guidance on the rules of engagement that must be followed. (He is told not to enter any fjords, and to focus his efforts on shipping-related targets). This makes an interesting link to *WE DIVE AT DAWN*, particularly in relation to the Luftwaffe man's comment to Taylor. It also immediately sets a particular tone of fair play and observance of 'the rules' even in war that aims to distinguish the actions of the Royal Navy submarines from those of the enemy.

Rank and class are interlinked in a manner familiar from other films considered already. This is again underscored by accent. As the cast is non-professional, the distinctions are both more marked and perhaps more true to life than in purely commercial output. Accordingly, the wardroom affects a standard Received Pronunciation mode of speech, whilst the mess deck characters display a greater range of regional types. The difference in social class between the

wardroom and the mess deck is therefore demonstrated.<sup>22</sup> However, in keeping with the portrayal of such issues in wartime output, common purpose between the social classes in the prosecution of the war is also shown. This is indicated in a number of ways.

Professional and technical competence at all levels in the boat's crew is shown, binding the men together, and serving to emphasise the democratised nature of a 'People's War'. The construction of interior scenes reinforces this. Shots of the crew operating complex equipment are shown, acting calmly and methodically. The crew takes direction and follows orders as would be expected in such an environment. They do not, however wait to be led. They are all independently specialist, and make their own contribution to the working of a practiced team. The casual mode of dress on the boat is adopted by all ranks. This acts as further, visual reinforcement of the sense of common purpose, and links to the promotion of the ideals of 'The People's War'.

A further unifying effect is obtained by the construction and editing of the narrative. Scenes showing Lieutenant-Commander Gregory as the boat's captain either in the wardroom or the control room are followed by scenes showing action in the torpedo room or amongst the ratings. In this way, the focus of the narrative does not rest disproportionately with one group, and invites the viewer to care about characters at all levels of the hierarchy in a way broadly similar to the approach taken in *IN WHICH WE SERVE* (albeit without the device of hearth and home sequences).

When considering the use of humour, this does however stem from the mess deck. This is sympathetically depicted, and does not reduce the characters to the status of clowns. Rather, it ties in to the broader aim of showing the national character at its best in times of adversity; the 'Britain can take it' philosophy. Humour also punctuates the portrayal of mundane daily routine. (Again, by showing aspects of domesticity — the ratings make toast, for example, and the captain considers tackling a crossword puzzle — the film offers a suggestion of tempered masculinity which provides a contrast to the presumed character of the 'enemy'). This is, however, a routine not lacking in physical hardship. The men in the torpedo room sleep on the deck plating, for example. By having a fighting space (the torpedo room) also serve as sleeping quarters (a domestic area) the mix of 'warlike' and 'domestic' features and the balance of attributes that characterise temperate masculinity are succinctly shown. Moreover, cheerful endurance of discomfort is another means to demonstrate the best of the national character, so fulfilling a propagandist aim.

Later, when some Norwegian refugees are taken onboard, their presence allows the narrative to encompass the plight of occupied and allied nations and to satisfy the 'all-in-together' notion fostered by much wartime film output. It also enables the notion of 'the enemy' to be developed. Earlier in the narrative, *Tyrant* sinks a U-Boat. The U-Boat crew is not shown as individuals, and there is something of a tone of regret when the *Tyrant's* captain comments on the lack of survivors. This 'brotherhood of the sea' (which seems to prefigure the attitude shown in *THE CRUEL SEA*), helps reinforce the idea of following the rules of engagement, and serves to emphasise the decency and sense of fair play of the British crew.<sup>23</sup> By contrast, when asked by one of the torpedo room artificers what would happen if they were picked up by the Germans, one refugee states bluntly that they would be killed. In this way, the narrative reinforces the view of the enemy as callous and routinely brutal.

The somewhat problematic nature of how to portray the role of women in 'The People's War' has been broached already in this study. In *CLOSE QUARTERS*, the role is limited so as to be almost invisible. There is not even the inclusion of a home front subplot or reference to briefly suggest the role of women. Indeed, aside from a very short sequence towards the start of the film when a group of marching WRNS is shown, women feature only as images. There are family photographs, and there are the pin-ups in the ratings' mess. In *CLOSE QUARTERS* the division between the roles allotted to men and women in wartime is most marked. Previously, it has been suggested that the role of women may necessarily be problematic given the closed world of the ship. In this case, the closed world serves to exclude women almost entirely, even as representatives of hearth and home.

The film had a favourable reception on its release, particularly in the 'highbrow' press. *The Times* reviewer's response has been noted in part before, and the review went on to praise the documentary reportage style of the film.<sup>24</sup> *The Daily Telegraph* was impressed with the portrayal of daily routine. This portrayal of the mundane and routine did not find universal favour. Reviews in the *Herald* and in *Kinematograph Weekly*, were more qualified in their praise. Each raised doubts about the inclusion of (what was perceived as) monotonous detail. Mackenzie draws the conclusion from this that the appeal of using a non-professional cast had passed, its highpoint having been *TARGET FOR TONIGHT*. He goes on to suggest that *CLOSE QUARTERS* also suffered from being released very soon after *WE DIVE AT DAWN*, and notes how the production did not get wide distribution or reviews.<sup>25</sup>

Mackenzie's study does note the Admiralty's willingness to continue to support film

productions into the post-war period, especially as their Lordships were keen to have positive publicity for the role of the Royal Navy.<sup>26</sup> In addition, for producers, films based on submarines had natural dramatic potential, and were likely to be popular with audiences, whilst not requiring overly elaborate (and therefore expensive) sets and staging.

The incorporation into films centred on submarine warfare of the idea of a 'People's War' has been considered in conjunction with a number of themes. There is the use of accented language to denote difference between social classes, without leading to a sense that the contribution of one class is less valuable. There is also the way that a particular notion of masculinity in wartime can be used to express national character and identity. As such it can also be seen reflected in the way that women conduct themselves. Furthermore, because of its component traits, it can be reflective of opposition to the enemy, whose masculinity is characterised by aggression, not tempered by calm and reason. In addition, the typical mixture of 'warlike' and 'domestic' features, which link back to the crucial balance of characteristics found in wartime masculinity are also brought into focus, reinforced by the proximity of life aboard submarines.

The next chapter will move on to consider films showing some of the other kinds of operations carried out by naval forces in the Second World War.

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1 Karl Lautenschlager, 'The Submarine in Naval Warfare, 1901-2001', *International Security* 11, 3 (1986), 94-140, p.105

2 Correlli Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely* (London, 2001), p.44

3 *Ibid.* p.44

4 Richard Hough, *The Longest Battle. The War at Sea 1939-45* (London, 2003), p.274

5 Jonathan Rayner, *The Naval War Film-Genre, History, National Cinema* (Manchester, 2007)

6 Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (Middleton, CT, USA, 2003), p.20

7 S.P. MacKenzie, *British War Films 1939-1945, The Cinema and the Services* (London, 2006), p.83

8 *Ibid.* p.83

9 Roger Manvell, *Films and the Second World War* (South Brunswick and New York, USA, 1974), p.144

10 S.P. MacKenzie, *British War Films*, p.83

11 *Ibid.* p.84

12 See Jo Fox, 'Millions like Us? Accented Language and the 'Ordinary' in British Films of the Second World War' *Journal of British Studies* 45,4 (2006), 819-845 for a discussion of the use of accented language

13 Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire 1939-1965* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 46-47, notes how Canadian characters—in the example given, those in *49th Parallel*—were used to reinforce the sense of united opposition to Germany across an 'ethnically diverse' empire.

14 Gill Plain, *John Mills and British Cinema* (Edinburgh, 2006), p.68

15 Sonya O. Rose, 'Temperate Heroes, Masculinity in Second World War Britain' in Stefan Dudink et al (eds), *Masculinities in Politics and War, Gendering Modern History* (Manchester, 2004), p.180

16 S.P. MacKenzie, *British War Films*, p.84 and Gill Plain, *John Mills*, p.68

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- 17 Robert Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War* ( London, 2000), p.90
- 18 Wendy Webster, *British Myths of the Resistance, 1938-50*, pp.2-3
- 19 S.P.MacKenzie, *British War Films*, p.85
- 20 Ibid.p.86
- 21 'CLOSE QUARTERS', *The Times*, 23 June 1943 , (online). Available from <http://infotrac.london.galegroup.com> (Accessed 16 October 2007)
- 22 Again, see FOX,J., Millions like Us? Accented Language and the 'Ordinary' in British Films of the Second World War , *Journal of British Studies* 45,4 (2006), 819-845 for a discussion of the use of accented language and its connection to consensus and the 'People's War'
- 23 For an outline of the retention of 'gentlemanly' notions of masculinity see Andrew Spicer, *Typical Men , Representation of Masculinity in Popular British Culture* (London, 2001), pp.7-8
- 24 'CLOSE QUARTERS', *The Times*, 23 June 1943 , (online). Available from <http://infotrac.london.galegroup.com> (Accessed 16 October 2007)
- 25 S.P.MacKenzie, *British War Films* ,p.87
- 26 Ibid.p.143

## OTHER NAVAL OPERATIONS

As the Royal Navy was in action virtually from the outbreak of war, the breadth of its operations is clearly too great to be adequately dealt with in this study. However, a few examples, drawn from operations carried out early in the conflict can be used as an indication of the varied duties carried out by naval forces, in addition to those considered in previous chapters.

Despite arguments in the interwar years, there was still a role, albeit a changed one, for the battleship. As has been mentioned before, Admiral Raeder of the Kriegsmarine maintained his faith in the battleship as a weapon. In his case, the strategy was to use them together with the U-Boat fleet as commerce raiders. It would be against one of these raiders, the *Graf Spee*, that the Royal Navy achieved a notable success early in the war, on December 13th 1939. At a time of so-called 'Sitzkrieg' when there was not much to celebrate, the *Graf Spee* action provided a welcome respite, demonstrating that, of all the services, it was the navy that was taking the fight to the enemy.<sup>1</sup> (The action would still resonate in the 1950s when it formed the basis of the Powell and Pressburger film *THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE*).

The Royal Navy was in action again on May 26th 1940 for Operation Dynamo, the evacuation from Dunkirk. By the time that the operation ended on June 4th, 338,226 personnel had been evacuated, compared to the 45,000 it had originally hoped could be rescued.<sup>2</sup> In April 1941, the Royal Navy had to carry out the withdrawal of Allied forces from Greece, with the evacuation having to take place under even more difficult circumstances than at Dunkirk. The operation was further affected by having to go ahead at night, to try and avoid air attack. Nevertheless, over 50,000 troops were withdrawn, testament to the skills of the naval forces.<sup>3</sup>

After the withdrawal to Crete, the next task was to defend the island. In the actions that followed, the Royal Navy achieved its objective of preventing enemy troops landing by sea. (Which, like the evacuation from Dunkirk was used by Noel Coward in *IN WHICH WE SERVE*). Airborne landings did however take place, leading to a speedy build-up of German troop numbers. By May 27th, Wavell notified London that the island should be evacuated as soon as possible.<sup>4</sup> Once more, the Royal Navy took part in a sea borne evacuation, which began on the

night of 28th/29th May. At the end of the operation on June 1st, 16,500 had been rescued. This was, as before, at great cost to naval strength. Including the defensive phase, the operations on Crete had seen the loss of 3 cruisers and 6 destroyers, as well as serious damage to the carrier *Formidable* and the battleship *Warspite*. This left the Mediterranean Fleet at half its operational strength.<sup>5</sup>

Before the Cretan debacle, Fleet Air Arm Swordfish had been instrumental in neutralising the threat of the Italian battle fleet, at anchor in Taranto harbour. The crews of 21 Swordfish flying off *Illustrious* had to negotiate their attack past 21 anti-aircraft batteries and searchlights, and get their torpedoes past net defences. Operation Judgement commenced on November 11th 1940, and by 02.50 the following day the battleships *Littorio*, *Duilio* and *Cavour* had been sunk. Damage had been caused as well to several destroyers and cruisers, whilst a seaplane base had been destroyed. The outcome was that the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean effectively removed the Italian fleet from contention, even as a 'fleet-in-being'.<sup>6</sup> Having seen something of the historical background, it is appropriate to turn now to some of the films which used the events as inspiration. Consideration will be given to the way in which films developed to show the ethos of the 'People's War'. Alongside this, the examination of the portrayal of wartime masculinity and the characteristic balance of warlike and domestic attributes seen in naval war films will be continued. The present chapter will therefore develop the arguments made in earlier chapters, demonstrating how the approach adopted in this study builds upon prior scholarship whilst offering a novel insight into the nature of war films made on a naval subject.

The 1940 Gainsborough production *FOR FREEDOM* mentioned previously showed what might be termed the 'sequel' to the *Graf Spee* action. This was the rescue by a boarding party from HMS *Cossack* of prisoners held on the *Graf Spee's* supply ship, the *Altmark*. The boarding party are seen swarming over the rails of the German ship, adding to the overall impression that the action had something of a buccaneering air about it, especially as Churchill--then First Lord of the Admiralty--had been prepared to see Norwegian neutrality breached in order for it to go ahead. The raid was seen to be worthy of celebration, and so features as a re-enactment in *FOR FREEDOM*, the film itself concludes with footage of Churchill speaking at the Guildhall, to an audience including the crews of *Exeter* and *Ajax*, both in action at the River Plate. He refers to the "long arm of British sea power", which chimes well with the generally congratulatory air, and praises the actions of *Cossack* against the *Altmark*. As Churchill also refers to Nelson's Trafalgar signal, the whole effect is to emphasise the British maritime tradition, and focus on

victory.

Given that the film appeared in May 1940, the celebratory and congratulatory tone served an important morale-raising function, reminding the audience of battles already won. In the *Altmark* sequence the navy is shown acting in a decisive, aggressive role, and the enemy is seen capitulating without showing much will to fight. Along with scenes showing the Royal Navy marching through London, the Guildhall banquet emphasises the idea of victorious celebration.

The Ealing production *SHIPS WITH WINGS* of 1941 followed the company's earlier maritime film, *CONVOY*. After the popular success of *CONVOY*, Admiralty co-operation had been received in order to make a film which would foreground the fighting role of the Fleet Air Arm.<sup>7</sup> The narrative focus is on the actions of Lieutenant Stacey, dismissed from the service in disgrace after causing the death of the Admiral's son. The plot develops to show his eventual redemption, by carrying out a gallant, solo action against an Italian-occupied island. This results in his own death, but saves the fleet acting in support of invasion forces.<sup>8</sup> The emphasis is squarely on the officer-class, and on the individual hero, some distance from the promotion of the idea of 'The People's War' which has been discussed before.

The film was, thanks to Admiralty assistance notable for containing footage shot on the aircraft carrier *Ark Royal*, the ship being credited as 'playing' the role of the film's aircraft carrier *Invincible*. Highlighting the Fleet Air Arm was particularly significant given the F.A.A's success at Taranto late in 1940. However, the dramatic content of the production caused disquiet in some quarters.

In fact, no less a figure than Churchill expressed his concern about the film's content, especially Stacey's final act, which he feared would spread 'alarm and despondency'. He also seemed to have been concerned about the level of losses suffered by the F.A.A in the film.<sup>9</sup> Of the professional critics, William Whitebait, writing in *The New Statesman* referred to the film as being "bad Boy's Own" in style and in tone. He also commented on the artificiality of the characters, in their "gestures and accents".<sup>10</sup> Adding to the scathing reviews, *Documentary News Letter* suggested that the "propaganda line of the film would be more appropriate to a Ruritanian campaign than to the Second World War".<sup>11</sup> Perhaps influenced by what had come to be the accepted canon of significant wartime output, such critical views persisted into the post-war assessment of the film. Roger Manvell, writing in 1974<sup>12</sup>, suggested that *SHIPS WITH WINGS* tried, yet failed, to mix a realistic approach (*the Ark Royal* footage) with romantic subject matter. Robert Murphy follows suit. He suggests that the use of documentary footage shot on

*Ark Royal* did not prevent the film from becoming a "romantic melodrama".<sup>13</sup> A present day viewer is indeed struck by the lack of promotion of consensus in line with 'the People's War' idea. Public school high jinks characterise the portrayals of the wardroom characters. (Which is itself indicative of a particular mechanism of male bonding, denoted by horseplay, and one that is seen in some post war films).<sup>14</sup> The distance between officers and the ratings and Petty Officers is therefore very marked, as these characters are largely depicted in a variety of 'servant' roles, as stewards or messengers.

The portrayal of the enemy is, as might be expected, intensely stereotyped. The Germans feature as Fifth Columnists who brutally abuse the Greek owner of the airline which Stacey works for and the Italians are depicted as comic-opera buffoons. In contrast, Stacey, even when fighting Wagner, the Fifth Columnist, adheres to notions of fair play and decency, resulting in the oft-quoted line "Get up you filthy Hun, I want to hit you again". While this all appears very old-fashioned, and unintentionally comic, to modern day viewers, it points to the persistence of 'chivalric' and gentlemanly notions of masculinity at this stage in the production of war films, and serves to emphasise the fundamental difference between the British, and their (obviously) brutal enemy.

Notwithstanding the concerns of Whitebait and others, reviewers of the time praised the production. Reviews in the *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Express* commented favourably on the film's appeal to a patriotic sensibility.<sup>15</sup> *The Monthly Film Bulletin* praised the realism afforded by the footage of the *Ark Royal*. *The Monthly Film Bulletin* was also prepared to suggest that viewed uncritically, the fast pace of the narrative made up for the melodramatic aspect of the film.<sup>16</sup> *The Times* took a similarly qualified perspective, noting the self-conscious dialogue, yet still thinking the film a good follow-on from *CONVOY*.<sup>17</sup>

Aldgate and Richards cite Mass Observation reports which point to a highly favourable audience response. The propaganda impact of the production was also noted favourably by Mass Observation. The conclusion was that *SHIPS WITH WINGS* had a wide audience appeal, with only a small section of the populace being actively critical of it.<sup>18</sup> Box office receipts also bear out the findings of Mass Observation. *SHIPS WITH WINGS* became the second most popular production nationally in its first month on general release. So, despite the view of a number of what might be termed 'highbrow' critics, the film was a significant popular success.<sup>19</sup> Aldgate and Richards go on to suggest that the film's original audience were not fazed by the staginess of the production, and its portrayal of social class in a traditional way, to the extent

that the film would have appeared as "urgent, timely, and patriotic".<sup>20</sup>

Despite this, Michael Balcon cited *SHIPS WITH WINGS* as his motivation for changing tack in future Ealing productions. The suggestion has been offered by some commentators<sup>21</sup> that Balcon's change of heart came about because of three factors. Firstly Balcon's patriotic nature was bruised by Churchill's criticism of *SHIPS WITH WINGS*, secondly he needed credibility amongst serious artists and critics. Thirdly, there is the suggestion that Balcon and his staff were becoming more socially aware (the so-called 'mild revolution'), and so wished to foreground the contribution of 'ordinary people' to the war. Henceforward the influence of the pre-war documentarist movement would be seen in film production from Ealing.

This shift from 'tinsel' to 'realism' at the studio under Balcon would see productions emerge like *THE FOREMAN WENT TO FRANCE*, *NINE MEN* and *SAN DEMETRIO LONDON*. The year after *SHIPS WITH WINGS* was released, the Two Cities production *IN WHICH WE SERVE* marked a significant shift in the way the war was portrayed on film.

Noel Coward was inspired to make a film about the work of the Royal Navy that might influence public opinion, particularly in the USA, after hearing of the loss of HMS *Kelly* off Crete from his close friend (and *Kelly*'s captain) Louis Mountbatten.<sup>22</sup> The production was not without its difficulties. These centred on the public's perception of Noel Coward himself. His urbane, playboy persona led to some elements of the press, particularly the *Daily Express*, taking issue with him portraying a member of the fighting services.

In addition, Jack Beddington of the Ministry of Information, after reading the script in December 1941, believed that the film would be bad propaganda as the subject was the loss of a fighting ship. It fell to Mountbatten to intervene and cause the Ministry to back down. Mountbatten also wielded his influence to provide Coward with advisors to assist on the production, one to ensure authenticity for the wardroom portrayals, and another for the mess deck. His involvement also went one stage further, by 'persuading' the Board of Trade to part with steel stock for set construction.<sup>23</sup>

Eventually titled *IN WHICH WE SERVE*, the film was based around the story of HMS *Kelly*, with the film's subject the destroyer HMS *Torrin*. The film follows the *Torrin* from construction to her sinking off Crete, interspersed with operations in the North Atlantic, and at Dunkirk. At the heart of the film is the way that the narrative is developed by the use of flashbacks, as three central characters think back to earlier events as they await rescue from their Carley float after the sinking of the *Torrin*.

This characterisation is highly significant. The film is structured to show three distinct levels of society, working together, and sharing common beliefs. There is *Torrin's* commander, Kinross who is from the upper class, CPO Hardy who represents the middle classes, and Ordinary Seaman Shorty Blake, emblematic of the working class. By using "accented language and class-specific dialogue" the social status of each is indicated.<sup>24</sup> Whilst Coward's construction of the narrative in no way seeks to challenge the stratification of society by class, it nonetheless invites the viewer to see the commonalities and shared values between classes, and the harmony that exists in adverse conditions. Jo Fox has made reference to this "suspension of the pre-war world".<sup>25</sup> Whilst they cannot be ignored, class divisions and inequalities can be set aside for the duration of hostilities in order to achieve the common aim of victory.<sup>26</sup> In this regard, the 'People's War' ideals are shown to be at the forefront. The mutually-held set of beliefs are reinforced in flashback, as three different Christmas celebrations are depicted when all three groups toast their ship. The ship is seen as representative of the nation as a whole, united overall, irrespective of other social divisions.<sup>27</sup> (In addition to these 'hearth-and-home' reminiscences the narrative also depicts something of 'temperate' wartime masculinity.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, after the *Torrin* takes on men evacuated from Dunkirk, Blake is shown dispensing hot drinks, helping a man too injured to drink unaided).

On the Carley float as well, the different groups are linked together in adversity. They join in community singing to keep up their spirits, and Kinross aids Blake in getting Hardy onto the float. This all-in-it-together spirit of support and co-operation is seen also in sequences showing the provisioning of the newly commissioned ship, with all members of the ship's company taking an active part. A further, and more personal, connection between Kinross and his men is indicated when he meets Blake and his new wife on a leave train. In conversation it is discovered that Blake is on his way with his wife to honeymoon in Torquay. This prompts Kinross to share the information that he and Mrs. Kinross also spent their honeymoon in Torquay.

Again, the sense of common purpose, shared values and experiences ties neatly to the Ministry of Information's promotion of the notion of the 'People's War'. Nonetheless, given the Service subject, the film still shows a rigid hierarchy, denoted by rank and by accent. Coward was not questioning the idea of a set order in society, but did value the idea of promoting a greater understanding between social classes, as noted by Aldgate and Richards in their study of the film. In this sense, his celebration of the national spirit, a belief in justice and 'decency'

shared something with Orwell and Priestley.<sup>29</sup> The difference, however, lay in Orwell and Priestley's view that the war could be the engine of lasting social change, leading to alterations in society that would persist into the post-war era.

Notwithstanding these differences, Coward's "affirmation of the national spirit" had great value for the war effort.<sup>30</sup> *IN WHICH WE SERVE* shows this national spirit in terms of restraint and quiet fortitude. As the ship's company go about their tasks with efficiency and professionalism, so, on the Home Front, this conduct is mirrored by the female characters. Again, the film shows this occurring across social classes. So, whilst women have no active role in war work, they are shown maintaining some semblance of normal life, which is indicative of what is being fought to preserve. They are also, particularly in the scenes showing the blitz on Plymouth, shown enduring hardships and dangers which are the equal of those faced by the male characters. This equality of endurance and fortitude, and of 'getting on with it', serves to further emphasise the 'People's War' ideal.

The overall effect in propaganda terms is to reinforce the idea of the nation acting in concert to defeat the enemy, and doing-so calmly and with determination. The narrative also does not shy away from showing the need for sacrifice, and from showing personal loss—for example, Hardy's wife is killed in an air raid. There is also room to show something of a political dimension. When impending war is being discussed, this is done in terms of preventing Germany's aim for world domination. Therefore for all the doubts expressed by the Ministry of Information, the film succinctly states its primary aims for film propaganda.

The film was well-received on release, becoming the most successful film made in Britain during the war. The *Spectator* was impressed with the restrained nature of the film, its lack of melodrama and excessive heroics. The reviewer also praised the sensitive portrayals of working class characters. *The Daily Mirror* noted the film's authenticity; how it showed the Royal Navy in a very positive light. Even William Whitebait offered some plaudits.<sup>31</sup> The *Manchester Guardian* thought the film was realistic and sincere, sparing the viewer nothing in showing what had to be endured at sea.<sup>32</sup> For its part, *The Monthly Film Bulletin* thought the film should be seen by everyone, and believed it served an excellent propaganda purpose.<sup>33</sup>

As has been shown, the differences between *SHIPS WITH WINGS* and *IN WHICH WE SERVE* quite neatly demonstrate the way in which films developed to include elements that are typical of the 'People's War'. In *SHIPS WITH WINGS* there are remnants of pre-war conventions with

self-sacrifice at the heart of gentlemanly conduct. The separation between heroic leaders and 'the rest' is sharply drawn. *IN WHICH WE SERVE* acknowledges class difference ( notably, Noel Coward's portrayal of Kinross harks back to the conventions apparent in *SHIPS WITH WINGS*) yet the narrative still manages to display a greater sense of common purpose and involvement from all levels of society. Ordinary ratings get equal time 'on screen' and the viewer is invited to take an interest in them as individuals, not as a parade of servants or comic stereotypes.

Having considered the way that wartime films approached the subject of naval warfare in this, and in previous chapters, the next will address the way that post-war film-makers tackled the same material, and how this led to differences in portrayal.

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1 Richard Hough, *The Longest Battle. The War at Sea 1939-45* (London, 2003), pp. 6-8

2 Correlli Barnett, *Engage the Enemy More Closely* ( London, 2001), p.161

3 Ibid.p.350

4 Ibid.pp.359-360

5 Ibid.p.363

6 Richard Hough, *The Longest Battle*, pp.211-213

7 S.P.MacKenzie, *British War Films 1939-1945, The Cinema and the Services* (London, 2006), p.68

8 See Andrew Spicer, *Typical Men , Representation of Masculinity in Popular British Culture*

(London, 2001), p.9 for the idea of self-sacrifice contained in the notion of 'gentlemanliness'

9 Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It- The British Cinema in the Second World War* ( London, 2007), p.319

10 For a detailed discussion of the wartime shift away from the convention of using 'West End' theatrical voices in films, see Jo Fox, 'Millions like Us? Accented Language and the 'Ordinary' in British Films of the Second World War, *Journal of British Studies* 45, 4 (2006), 819-845

11 Cited in Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, p. 320

12 Roger Manvell, *Films and the Second World War* (South Brunswick and New York, USA, 1974), p.63

13 Robert Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War* (London, 2000), p.24

14 For a general survey of masculinities, and a discussion of homosocial communities, see Martin Francis, 'The Domestication of the Male? Recent Research on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Masculinity', *The Historical Journal* 45, 3 (2002) ,637-652. The kind of behaviour exhibited in the wardroom is also seen, for example, in the officers' mess in *THE DAMBUSTERS* (1955), and in P.O.W camp films, notably *THE COLDITZ STORY* (1955)

15 Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, p.318

16 The British Film Institute. *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 8, 96 (1941), p.161

17 '*SHIPS WITH WINGS*'; *The Times*, 10 November 1941, (online). Available from <http://infotrac.london.galegroup.com> (Accessed 16 October 2007)

18 Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, p.324

19 Ibid. p.324

20 Ibid. p.325

21 Ibid. p.326

22 S.P.MacKenzie, *British War Films*, p.73

23 Ibid.p.76

24 Jo Fox, 'Millions like Us? Accented Language and the 'Ordinary' in British Films of the Second World War, *Journal of British Studies* 45,4 (2006), 819-845,p.837

25 Ibid. p.837

26 Ibid. p.839

27 Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, p.203

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- 28 See Sonya O. Rose, 'Temperate Heroes, Masculinity in Second World War Britain' in Stefan Dudink et al (eds), *Masculinities in Politics and War, Gendering Modern History* (Manchester, 2004), p.181 for reference to 'good humour and decency' as part of 'British civilisation'
- 29 Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, p.192
- 30 Ibid. p.193
- 31 S.P.MacKenzie, *British War Films*, pp.80-81
- 32 'IN WHICH WE SERVE', *The Manchester Guardian*, 24 September 1942, (online). Available from <http://archive.guardian.co.uk> (Accessed 16 October 2007)
- 33 The British Film Institute. *The Monthly Film Bulletin*, 9, 107 (1942), p.142

## NAVAL WAR FILMS IN THE POST-WAR ERA

Previous chapters in this study have concentrated on the way wartime films were used to promote the role of the Royal Navy and Merchant Service and the idea of the 'People's War'. Consideration has been given to the ways that the themes of social class, gender roles, and attitudes to the enemy were elaborated in these films. The present chapter will focus on the ways in which these themes were modified in films made after the war; the shift to portraying an 'Officer's War', the changes in how women are shown, how men behave and how the enemy is perceived. Some of the reasons that have been advanced to account for the changes will also be considered.

It has been noted by one commentator<sup>1</sup> that films with a naval subject out-number those made in the 1950s which deal with other aspects of the war. *MORNING DEPARTURE* was released in 1950, and was the first post-war film on a naval subject. It is, however, not concerned with the navy at war; rather, the narrative is about a submarine crew trapped in their crippled vessel. In contrast, *THE GIFT HORSE* used warfare as its subject, and appeared in 1952. The narrative is concerned with one of the former United States Navy destroyers which were assigned as convoy escorts. Commissioned as HMS *Ballantrae*, the elderly vessel and her crew are presented as a less than efficient fighting unit. The ship runs aground; a rendezvous is missed whilst on convoy, which results in the loss of another ship. The film concludes with the *Ballantrae* used to destroy a dry-dock, in a recreation of the *Campbeltown* at St. Nazaire. Admiralty co-operation on the production<sup>2</sup> ensured that arrangements were made for returning a flush-decker to service, depth-charge operations were filmed, and a submarine was provided to 'play' a U-Boat. Facilities were even extended to allow filming at Portsmouth Naval Dockyard. Also, at the Admiralty's suggestion, a retired naval commander, RS Abram acted as advisor to the production.

Marking the shift away from wartime films, characters from the mess deck remain barely sketched-in. As Murphy notes: "the film's echoes of wartime populism are faint and weary".<sup>3</sup> This extends to the limited way that 'domestic' space is treated. Scenes on the mess deck of a kind familiar from wartime films focus on the seasickness of the new crewmen, so serve to

emphasise inexperience rather than pointing to the characteristic domestic/warlike combination of shipboard settings. Also, while there is not a total return to the conventions of pre-war cinema, where working class characters are used as comic stereotypes, there are nonetheless traces of this in *THE GIFT HORSE*. For example, when the crew demonstrates loyalty to their ship and their captain they do so in the setting of a pub brawl, which is filmed in the manner of a slapstick comedy. As Ramsden notes, a major difference between wartime and post-war output is that the makers and audience know victory has already been achieved.<sup>4</sup> This necessarily affects the tone and the approach taken by the production, and the emphasis becomes less focused on 'how we will win', and more on reminding the audience that victory was achieved.

On release the reviewers detected the echoes of *IN WHICH WE SERVE*. *The Times* of July 21st 1952<sup>5</sup> made specific reference to the film, but in terms of *THE GIFT HORSE* not being a real competitor to the earlier production. The public liked the film,<sup>6</sup> but it was to be overshadowed by *THE CRUEL SEA*, which was in production before *THE GIFT HORSE* was released. *THE CRUEL SEA* appeared in 1953, and was based on Nicholas Monsarrat's novel. The narrative is concerned with the Battle of the Atlantic, and with escort duties on Arctic convoys. The film manages to show the hardships and some of the moral issues attendant on fighting a war much more graphically than films made during wartime. In the post-war era a different approach could be taken as there was no longer a need to foster the correct fighting spirit in pursuit of victory. The war had already been won, so an exploration of the effect of the war on individuals could be attempted. Accordingly, the viewer is shown the eventual hardening of Ericson, and his determination to destroy a U-Boat, even to the extent of running down survivors in the water. The effect on Ericson of dealing with such moral dilemmas is plainly shown, as he weeps and drinks himself insensible. This would not have been shown in a wartime production, and runs contrary to the common criticism of post-war films, that they are too focused on the 'stiff upper lip'. How this idea of the 'stiff upper lip' can also be related to the notion of 'masculinity' in the era will be considered later, when *SINK THE BISMARCK!* is considered.

A further shift away from the approach taken in wartime films is noted by Mackenzie. He suggests that the film differs from the novel in creating an exclusively middle-class core of characters. In the novel, Ericson's background is shown to be in the merchant service. Mackenzie suggests that this is skirted over in the film.<sup>7</sup> Reference is indeed brief. In voice-over Jack Hawkins refers to serving in the Merchant Navy ("Where I belonged"), as part of

introducing the commissioning of his ship, *Compass Rose*. Murphy also notes an emphasis on middle-class professionalism. Significantly, the first officer at the time of the working-up exercises on the *Compass Rose* is shown as arrogant and lazy. His background (that of second-hand car salesman) makes him different to the other wardroom characters. He is plainly not of 'their kind', and his early removal allows an entirely middle class tone to settle over the narrative once his character departs.<sup>8</sup> Rattigan suggests that revision of the idea of 'The People's War' was a reaction to wartime output showing the active role of the working class.<sup>9</sup> Instead, the middle class sought to re-fight the war on film whilst privileging their own role in the proceedings.

Rattigan's suggestion is an interesting one. However, his highly theoretical approach (rooted in Gramscian thinking, as noted in an earlier chapter) does not easily account for some of the changes seen in war films. For example, the bleakness of *THE KEY* or the portrayal of the strain of command seen in *THE CRUEL SEA* cannot be appreciated fully by reference to Rattigan's argument. Rattigan's study has at its heart the suggestion that the narrative emphasis in war films made in the postwar period shifted in a concerted effort to return the middle class to prominence. Whilst the issue of social class is an important one his assessment does not acknowledge the way that films made in the post-war era could explore matters over-and-above those of class alone. It does not allow for a more nuanced view of the films, and cannot properly account for some of the elements seen in films like *THE CRUEL SEA*. Ericson is shown to be vulnerable. He succumbs to the effect of involvement in total war, making the portrayal much different to one of straightforward heroism, in which the representatives of the middle class re-fight the war on their terms alone.

In contrast, Pronay<sup>10</sup> and Ramsden's<sup>11</sup> studies offer a more rounded appreciation of films made after the war's end. Encompassing an exploration of the psychological effects of the war that feature in some postwar films, Pronay argues that war films made in the postwar era had a cathartic effect, suggesting that the films act as a kind of 'post mortem' examination, allowing the audience to "re-live vicariously their experiences, the fears, guilt and dilemmas of their own particular war".<sup>12</sup> By addressing some of the omissions in Rattigan's study Pronay's argument is altogether more persuasive. Coming after Pronay, John Ramsden's study considers the original argument, taking his conclusions further by offering reasons for the remarkable success of war films made in Britain in the 1950s, and for their foregrounding of the middle-class. He suggests that the key factor was the readily-available stock of source material (for example, war

memoirs written by former officers which would obviously reflect the views of one social class). When these were made into films their initial popularity prompted the making of others. As nothing breeds success quite so well as success itself, the 1950s 'war film boom' in Britain was the result.<sup>13</sup>

Ramsden also contrasts the output at the 'peak' of the war—between 1940 and 1943—with that of the 1950s. He notes that the films made post-war do not strive to mobilise support for an ideal of 'The People's War', lacking the wartime celebration of the nation acting in harmony in the pursuit of a common goal.<sup>14</sup> Murphy makes a similar point, suggesting that the 'populism' noted in wartime output was edged aside in post-war films, especially as there was by then no need to try and meld together all parts of society in order to fight the war.<sup>15</sup>

In contrast then, to films made during the war, *THE CRUEL SEA* appears to lack the portrayal of a 'democratised' society. The idea of rank and hierarchy is given prominence, with a greater sense of the separateness of the 'leader'. This is indicated in a variety of ways, including showing technical competence as largely the preserve of the officers. In contrast to the wartime production *WE DIVE AT DAWN* which shows the working class rating Hobson as highly skilled in using hydrophone apparatus, in *THE CRUEL SEA* it is the officer Lockhart who interprets the information from the ship's sonar. The idea is also underscored in the sequences on the Carley floats after the sinking of the *Compass Rose*. The motivation of the survivors falls entirely to Ericson and to his Number One, Lockhart. In a positive sense, the viewer can admire their expression of duty and obligation to their crewmen, whilst understanding nonetheless that there is a division between them as 'leaders' and the rest of the survivors.

Development of the characters from the lower decks is limited. Considering that the film makes the point of demonstrating the inexperience of the bulk of the ship's company it is striking that focus on developing experience should rest entirely with the (middle class) wardroom characters. As has been noted above, Ramsden offers a persuasive explanation for this emphasis on one class. He suggests that the popular book market was dominated by war-related publications, be they memoirs, histories of particular units or actions, stories of escape or biographies of war heroes. This, he argues, provided a fertile source for film-makers.<sup>16</sup> Given that the publications were mainly the product of articulate members of the officer class, it was almost inevitable that films based on these works would reflect the views and actions of that social group.

Earlier in this study, reference has been made to the problematic nature—given the maritime

setting of the films considered— of the depiction of women, and their wartime role. This is in addition to the contrast with wartime output, which often depicted an active wartime role for women as a feature of 'The People's War'. Even taking into account the presence of the closed world of the ship, and its literal isolation from home, the narrative of *THE CRUEL SEA* limits the active wartime role of women, and virtually eliminates the 'hearth and home' sub-plots familiar in wartime output. Interestingly, Harper and Porter cite the original publicity material for the film, which stated that "feminine roles will occupy little time on the screen and for this reason their appearance will stand out". This would seem to be trying to make a virtue out of a marginalised role for women in the film.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, WRNS are shown at work in the plotting room, and Lockhart develops a relationship with WRNS Officer Hallam. However, this is shown as being of lesser importance than the task of fighting the war, a task that must be carried out without distraction. This is recognised by Lockhart who explains that his relationship with Ericson (described by Lockhart as "like David and Jonathan") is "about the only type that war allows you".<sup>18</sup> This seems to indicate that it is male bonding<sup>19</sup> or 'homosocial' relationships that are of importance. Lockhart acts as Ericson's protégé, and it is in the relationship between the two men that the narrative comes closest to allowing 'the personal' to intrude.<sup>20</sup> Very often, such attachments and concerns are literally 'played out'—via horseplay<sup>21</sup> or banter. *THE CRUEL SEA* takes a different approach, whilst retaining the sense that important relationships are being forged without challenging heterosexual boundaries.

The portrayal of the enemy in *THE CRUEL SEA* is also notable. The opening narration emphasises that the main enemy is the sea itself. As a consequence, the hardships of convoy duty are displayed; the heavy seas and the discomfort of sailing in corvettes (a matter of record, given the unsuitability of corvettes for ocean-going work). The characters are also shown struggling against fatigue, and repetitive and largely unrewarded routine in a continuation of wartime films' emphasis of the need for stoicism in the face of hardship, while scenes around the wardroom table echo the 'warlike/domestic' amalgam noted previously in relation to wartime productions. The enemy are shown as individuals only once in the film, when the ship sinks a U-Boat. The attitude expressed by Lockhart is noteworthy --"they don't look very different to us". This seems in keeping with the view taken by Manvell, who notes that any sense of antagonism towards the enemy starts to fade in war films made in the post-war period. Manvell goes on to suggest that ultimately the view of the enemy changes to actual admiration for the enemy's abilities.<sup>22</sup> (This is a feature of *THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE*, which will be discussed

later).

*THE CRUEL SEA* received some measure of praise on its release. MacKenzie describes how the premiere night audience gave the film a standing ovation, and how Monsarrat himself was impressed by the attendance of senior members of the Royal Navy.<sup>23</sup> *The Times* reviewer of March 26th 1953<sup>24</sup> made special note of Jack Hawkins –playing Ericson, and Donald Sinden–playing Lockhart, primarily how Ericson becomes harder and less humane as the war progresses, unlike Lockhart. *The Manchester Guardian* reviewer of March 28th 1953<sup>25</sup> agreed that the film was a tough and harrowing “tribute to bravery at sea”. Again, casting was praised, but the point was made that the film did not bring anything truly original to the genre. This contention ought to be challenged, however. The development of Ericson’s character, for example, adds to the film’s originality, by enabling the narrative to explore the war’s effects. He is shown weeping and in an anguished state, broaching issues which would not have been possible in films made during the war.

Harper and Porter note that *THE CRUEL SEA* became the second most successful British production of 1953.<sup>26</sup> Their study also suggests that a growing social conservatism was reflected in films made later in the same decade as *THE CRUEL SEA*. They argue that these later films reassert the traditional structure of social classes, overlaid by a military hierarchy,<sup>27</sup> suggesting that the withdrawal from Suez in 1956 was the watershed moment when post-war films shifted away from the approach taken in wartime output.<sup>28</sup> The connection between pre-war films about empire and films made about the recent conflict is also apparent. As had been the case with the imperial hero, 1950s war films tended to place the narrative focus on educated, upper or middle-class men to the exclusion of others – the working class male, or women in their entirety. Old heroic virtues of courage, manliness, and self-sacrifice now became associated with the officer-protagonists of films about the Second World War.<sup>29</sup>

If the withdrawal from Suez is taken as the nadir of Britain as a significant world power, then the events had been building to that point since the end of the Second World War. Independence for India in 1947 was in part prompted by the dawning realisation that Britain could no longer maintain a large empire. The Malayan Emergency at the end of the 1940s and the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya at the start of the 1950s further highlighted the fragility of the remaining imperial structures. By 1956, the Suez Crisis merely underlined Britain’s reduced influence in world affairs, whilst the withdrawal under United States pressure seemed to emphasise the subordinate place Britain held in the ‘special relationship’. A series of events over

nearly 10 years culminated, it has been argued, in a significant loss of national confidence, the reaction to which would affect the content and tone of film productions. Therefore, loss of confidence is cited as the spur to make films which celebrate past victories in an unquestioning and unproblematic manner.

Ramsden addresses this idea in a different manner, and suggests that post-war films necessarily had to differ from wartime films, simply because they were made when victory had been achieved. In this way, then, the films no longer had to try and explain how victory might be gained. Instead, they can offer more in the way of reassurance that victory had been achieved, and could show those attributes that had ensured such a victory.

Ramsden argues that films could place an emphasis on portraying technical prowess, and uncomplaining sacrifice by the group. Whilst these are features familiar in wartime films, here the particular emphasis differs. The urge towards sacrifice for the greater good is now stated by the officers, and, Ramsden suggests, is shown as being accepted largely unquestioningly by the 'other ranks'.<sup>30</sup> The modification of the idea of 'The People's War' lies at the heart of the differences between films that were made in wartime, and those made in the post-war years. There is a sense still of the great endeavour, but success now (so it would seem) will be achieved through the guidance and leadership of one group, the officers. Whether the foregrounding of officer characters is deliberate (as suggested by Rattigan) and intended to re-assert the position of an embattled post-war middle class is open to debate. It is, nevertheless an interesting contention. What can be said with some certainty however, is that films in the post-war period are concerned less with fully developing the idea of a harmonious, socially and regionally varied group than those made in wartime. (Ramsden's idea of the emphasis on technical prowess also points to a shift in the portrayal of masculinity. Lockhart in *THE CRUEL SEA* for example has to demonstrate technical ingenuity and skill in combination with the more traditional features of manly conduct.)<sup>31</sup>

Post-war films could also differ from earlier output by taking a harsher and bleaker view of warfare than would have been possible in any films made during the war. *THE KEY*, made in 1958, is notable for taking this approach, and, unusually for a post-war production, for giving a major role to a female character. *THE KEY* centres on naval rescue tugs attached to merchant convoys in the Battle of the Atlantic. The Admiralty furnished support by allowing filming of the Assurance Class tug *Restive*, and (standing in as a U-Boat) *HMS Trespasser*.<sup>32</sup>

It goes further than *THE CRUEL SEA* in showing the effect of total war. In *THE KEY*

Ford (Trevor Howard) and later, Ross (William Holden) display a brittle, forced bonhomie, fuelled by drink, whilst grimly going about the task of trying to salvage stricken merchant ships. In *THE CRUEL SEA* the enemy is ultimately the harsh weather and the hardship of operations. In *THE KEY* the enemy would seem to be fear and despair. There is no sense in the film of either the promotion of necessary sacrifice to assure victory, or of a celebration of past glories. In these regards, the film differs from both wartime and much post-war output.

Coping with fear ("the enemy within yourself" as Ross is advised by another tug skipper, the Dutchman Van Dam) draws Ford, and also Ross into a relationship with Stella (Sophia Loren), the central female character. Unusually for post-war films she has a pivotal, if problematic, role. It is problematic in the way that it is implied that Stella is a commodity, passed from mariner to mariner along with the key to a flat. The role is pivotal in the way that it overturns the 'hearth and home' ideal shown in other war films. Ford's death abruptly ends his attempt at domestic normality, whilst Ross, despite a seemingly promising start, is finally overwhelmed by an awareness of his own doomed state, as the destructive effect of total war intrudes.

Stella is portrayed as taking a coldly pragmatic view of the world and the effects of the war. This differs from the stereotypical female role (possibly attributable to Stella's nationality – Swiss—setting her apart from British womanhood) shown in other post-war productions, normally based on nurturing and care. Ross tries to express sympathy and concern at Ford's death, but Stella responds by reminding him that normal concerns are irrelevant in time of war ("...not so important anymore now that people are so busy killing each other"). The statement almost seems unfeminine when considered alongside the standard portrayals of women in similar films, and is the more interesting as a result. The effect is reinforced later when Stella is shown sweeping the chimney, as Ross arrives carrying flowers, to brighten up the room, which seems to demonstrate a reversal in stereotypical roles. The focus on Stella's flat also offers something of a contrast to the portrayal of homosocial environments often seen and suggests that at least some of the 'home-loving' features of 'temperate' wartime masculinity are not excluded from post-war naval films. Nevertheless, such references are still problematic, as Stella is shown as a commodity, whilst hearth-and-home is no longer necessarily a refuge or haven.

The response received by the film on release was mixed. *The Times* was impressed by the realism of the scenes showing warfare. The reviewer also noted the accuracy of Trevor Howard's portrayal of Ford as a man on the brink of total collapse. Praise was also given to the

realism and believability of William Holden's character. While *The Times* offered qualified praise the *Film Quarterly* found few redeeming factors in the film. Considering the cinematography worthy of a documentary, and noting Carol Reed's sure touch as Director, the reviewer nonetheless considered the film to be clichéd and dull.<sup>33</sup> Audiences (as noted in MacKenzie<sup>34</sup>) were nevertheless still prepared to go and watch the film, resulting in the production making a reasonable sum at the box office.

*The Times* reviewer had been unsure about Stella, however, and the part of the plot in which the character appears, suggesting that much remains unanswered at the end of the film.<sup>35</sup> Later studies have also commented on aspects of Stella's character, namely that she seems to have premonitions, (of Ford's death, for example), which point to something 'macabre' about the film and a supposedly 'witch-like' quality in Stella.<sup>36</sup>

A more persuasive explanation might be found in Nicholas Pronay's study. The character traits noted can also be taken as indications of the psychological impact of the war, whilst the film overall depicts the struggle against fear. Pronay's suggestion that the main body of British war films made in the 1950s served a cathartic purpose can be applied to *THE KEY* well, as it surely would have enabled at least some of its audience to (as Pronay terms it) "lay the ghosts of the war".<sup>37</sup>

Taking all of this into account, *THE KEY* develops some interesting ideas when compared to other war films made in the post-war years. The overall situation in film, however, was a tendency to shift away from the promotion of shared ideals ('The People's War') and, ultimately, towards a more conservative outlook. Principally, the differences lie in the effect which the films hoped to achieve. Films made during the war had to have a particular propaganda effect. They had to serve to mobilise a nation with the aim of winning the war. A sense of common purpose and of making sacrifices individually for the benefit of the many had to be developed, whereas films made post-war did not have to have these emphases. Crucially, the requirement to fulfill the aims of the Ministry of Information's Programme for Film Propaganda no longer existed. This, and other differences will be examined as two post-war productions dealing with undersea operations are considered.

*ABOVE US THE WAVES* appeared in 1955. To some extent the film allowed John Mills to reprise his role in *WE DIVE AT DAWN*. This time, however, he was to portray Commander Fraser, in charge of the X-craft midget submarines tasked with sinking the *Tirpitz*. The narrative focus is on a small, specialist unit. This is reflective of the alteration in tone and content of post-

war output when compared with those made during the war. Also, while wartime films attempt to make some reference to the 'bigger picture', these references are much more limited (if they are perceptible at all) in films made post-war. So, in *ABOVE US THE WAVES*, there is reference at an officers' briefing to the risk posed by the *Tirpitz* remaining in operational readiness, but this is not developed further. Instead the narrative drive is maintained by the team being selected, trained and finally deployed. Presumably as a consequence of the demands imposed by working on midget submarines, technical ability is evenly distributed between officers and ratings. In this way, some remnant of the 'democratised' nature of wartime output is retained.

Nonetheless, the narrative displays the familiar separation between 'the leader and the led', which is most noticeable in the escape and evasion sequence that follows the abortive first attempt on the *Tirpitz*. When German guards have to be silenced, it is the officers who take the initiative. This is much different to the role assumed by Hobson in *WE DIVE AT DAWN* for example. This pattern is repeated later in the film when the X-craft are underway to *Tirpitz*. X-3 catches a mine in its towline, and significantly it is two officers who take the risk of fending off and disentangling the mine. There is then, something of an invitation to celebrate middle class professionalism and courage. Whilst the contribution of Petty Officers and Ratings is not ignored, officers are given centre stage. Significantly, the special advisor to the production was Commander Cameron, who had received the VC for his part in the *Tirpitz* operation. Ramsden's suggestion that it was the source material for many post-war films that made them more likely to foreground the role of middle class officers would seem then to fit the case of *ABOVE US THE WAVES*.<sup>38</sup>

The way in which the enemy is shown differs from that of wartime productions. Lord Vansittart, the former Permanent Under Secretary at the Foreign Office had found some favour with his broadcasts which portrayed the German nation as inherently violent, with Nazism being the latest outgrowth of this trait.<sup>39</sup> Whilst stopping short of a fully Vansittartist approach, wartime films had to, of necessity, demonstrate a particular perspective where the enemy was concerned. By contrast, in *ABOVE THE WAVES* the Kriegsmarine are shown as professional and competent (the look out spots one of the X-craft), courteous and almost chivalrous (the prisoners taken on board *Tirpitz* are saluted and given schnapps, with the captain's compliments).

This kind of portrayal of the enemy also marks out *THE SILENT ENEMY*, based on the real-life exploits of Lionel 'Buster' Crabb. The narrative opens in the aftermath of successful Italian

actions against British warships in Alexandria, the *Queen Elizabeth* and the *Valiant* having been sunk by the Maiale 'human torpedoes'. Further risk was perceived to Gibraltar, as the gateway to the Mediterranean and by extension, to the Malta convoys. Against this background Crabb's ill-equipped and ill-trained team of divers have to be mobilised and transformed into effective opposition to the Italian force operating from a base in nominally neutral Spain.

The film makes a great shift away from wartime output, notably, instead of being shown as buffoons the Italian divers and Maiale crews are shown to be courageous, and innovative (they use a secretly adapted ship as their operating base). When an Italian diver is taken prisoner he is treated sympathetically, whilst his dead colleague is given full military honours and is buried at sea. This goes beyond an attempt to show the inherent decency of the national character, when contrasted with the conduct of the enemy, as the Italians are not shown in a negative way to begin with. This rehabilitation of 'the enemy' is noted by Manvell in connection with films made post-war.<sup>40</sup> Particularly when viewed in the context of Cold War relations, films could start to show past adversaries as worthy opponents instead of enemies to be demonised.

The film also combines several other features that typify war films in the post-war years. The narrative focus rests on a small specialist unit in a way familiar from much output of the era. The central figure however is Crabb himself. In a very pronounced way the film invites the audience to admire his stamina, intellect and professional devotion to duty, indicative of Spicer's idea of middle-class professionalism being used as the ideal for masculine conduct.<sup>41</sup> His stamina is shown when he immediately turns to search for the submerged fuselage of General Sikorski's aircraft after already working all night. A slight attempt is made to develop interest in the lower deck characters, but these are barely sketched-in. Sidney James as the team's Petty Officer helps Crabb circumvent naval regulations, whilst acting in a kind of 'mother hen' capacity ensuring that the divers retain some level of naval discipline and stay clear of trouble.<sup>42</sup> The Leading Seaman has knowledge of Spanish (an echo of Hobson in *WE DIVE AT DAWN*) which assists in an undercover trip to Algeciras. Nevertheless, Crabb as 'the leader' remains the focus. He stands apart from the rest of the team, and to a degree apart from the regular naval hierarchy, in the opening scenes of the film, for example, when he is insistent that he will see the Admiral without making an appointment first.

Whilst this isolation in command is seen for example, in *THE CRUEL SEA*, there is still a sense of connection with the team as a whole. In *THE SILENT ENEMY*, by contrast, Crabb is apart from the team which he leads, which prefigures the 'individualist' characters seen in the

later development of war films into large-scale adventure narratives. In this way, it is a further shift away from the promotion of 'community' found in wartime output. *THE SILENT ENEMY* also has only limited space for female characters. This feature is common to much post-war output as the promotion of the ideas of The People's War recedes. The role for women is restricted to showing a WRNS officer, who provides some minor romantic interest for Crabb, and to the wife of his Italian adversary. In neither case is there much effort expended in showing the women in any truly active role. There is no reference to anything which would be suggestive of a world outside the actions of Crabb's team. (Even when there might be an expectation of some 'domestic' details being seen within this closed world, the nearest the film gets to showing it is through Sidney James' character, and this is staged in an almost comic way). The focus therefore is firmly on the operational group, and within that, on Crabb as the pivotal figure. Interestingly, The *Times* reviewer of March 5th 1958<sup>43</sup> hints at the importance of the individual and of the individualist character, both aspects which differ greatly from the all-in-it-together qualities of wartime film making.

*THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE* appeared in 1957. Produced by Powell and Pressburger, it shows the events leading to the scuttling of the *Graf Spee* off Montevideo in December 1939. The action is played out largely as a maritime game of chess, cruiser squadron versus surface raider. Compared to the way *IN WHICH WE SERVE* encourages the viewer to care about its range of characters on a personal level, *THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE* takes a more distanced approach, true to the opening statement of the film, 'A story of sea power', which implies that grander issues are the focus.

Nevertheless, in the scenes showing the rapport between Langsdorff of the *Graf Spee* and Dove, some idea of 'personality' does emerge. This however tends more to elaborating the way that the 'enemy' is viewed in the post-war era than anything else. Langsdorff was not the first of Powell and Pressburger's 'good Germans', the duo having depicted a sympathetic German character in *COLONEL BLIMP* and in *49<sup>TH</sup> PARALLEL*. The post-war rehabilitation of Germany is demonstrated in the sympathetic way that Langsdorff is portrayed. His essential decency of character is summed up by Dove: "He's a gentleman". The contrast here with the reconstructed scenes between the two men shown in *FOR FREEDOM* is notable. There, the relationship, such as it is, is based on verbal sparring, and Dove's attempt to continue fighting, by whatever means. Now that the war is over, a different tone is apparent. Some commentators have suggested that this alteration has a commercial basis, namely the growth in importance by

the mid-fifties of the West German film market.<sup>44</sup> Other studies point to different causes.

Public opinion towards Germany and the German people was surveyed by Gallup in 1947. The survey indicated that 42% of respondents held friendly feelings towards the German people. Whilst sensitivities remained, still being reflected in responses to films like *THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY* (in 1957), opinion was shifting towards the end of the 1950s.<sup>45</sup> The idea of the 'good German', distinct from the 'Nazi fanatic' would seem to have begun to gain currency, and would, undoubtedly have had influence by the time *THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE*.

In other aspects of characterisation, the film also differs from wartime output. The character focus in *THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE* is exclusively on the officer class, whether of the Royal Navy, or the merchant service. Scenes onboard ship are centred largely on events occurring on the bridge, further reinforcing the sense that strategic planning and action, rather than the personal is the emphasis. Naval ratings, when seen, are almost mute, making little contribution, if any at all. Their role seems to only be important when brute strength is required, as when *Exeter* suffers steering damage, and only force can shift the ship's position. Aside from these scenes focussed on brawn, the ratings are only used to provide a kind of comic, 'parish pump' commentary on the great events unfolding. All this contrasts starkly with the focus adopted in wartime output.

Note has been made in earlier chapters of the problems inherent in the portrayal of women in films bound by a ship-borne setting. In the case of *THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE*, the emphasis on strategy limits the role still further. Women are relegated to playing variously, a nightclub singer and a secretary (arranging 'phone calls, but little else) while diplomats plot the fate of the *Graf Spee* in Montevideo. There is never any sense that, beyond these stereotyped functions, women can play an active part in the events at hand. There is also, given the strategic emphasis, no room even for 'hearth and home', what is being preserved by fighting.

In fact, the lack of any political dimension —why the war must be fought and won— adds to the distance between this, and wartime productions. As Ramsden's study, which has been noted before suggests, this is highly characteristic of war films made after the end of the war. The war, after all, was already won when the film was made, so this "foreknowledge of victory" would of necessity affect any production.<sup>46</sup> The effect, it is suggested, was to have productions that re-stated and confirmed that Britain had won the war. As noted before, there is great debate as to whether this need for reassurance stems from a particular event, like the Suez crisis. In the case of *THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE*, what emerged has been termed a

"naval spectacle"<sup>47</sup>, shot in colour, perhaps pre-figuring the final shift to big-budget 'adventures with a wartime setting' that would come later.

*SINK THE BISMARCK!* appeared in 1960 and was, by any standard, a straightforward war story which continued in the vein of earlier productions in its socially conservative approach. The film is centred on the fictional character of Captain Shepard, co-ordinating operations at the Admiralty concerned with the search for the Bismarck and its eventual destruction. The character emphasis is squarely on officers. Ratings have little time on-screen, and even less to say. Their contribution is limited to a brief set of 'comic' quips, while the officers wrestle with the strategic and tactical problems of pursuing their quarry. *SINK THE BISMARCK!* comes at the end of the great British war film boom, and the division between wardroom and mess deck characters is most pronounced. The arguments as to why this should be so have been mentioned before. Whichever argument is favoured, it is certain that the wartime necessity of generating a sense of common purpose across society is long-since passed. Now the emphasis is on celebrating the war being won. Winning is now shown as a job for men, and for officers in particular, who must behave in a certain way.

Wartime films tended towards the development of the 'group as hero' in order to stress the principle of social consensus, post war films focus on officers, not on the ratings. Specific characteristics of masculine conduct are displayed. It has been argued that the concept of 'masculinity' is not fixed,<sup>48</sup> so as a template for behaviour, the particular version of masculinity seen in 1950s film is affected by a number of factors. Studies have examined influences as varied as 19th century 'muscular Christianity'<sup>49</sup>, the physical culture movement of the interwar years<sup>50</sup>, and, in film, a modification of pre-war 'gentlemanliness'.<sup>51</sup> This also contains the idea of the necessary separation of the heroic leader from the rest of the group, set apart by possession of leader-like attributes: courage, resourcefulness, moral integrity. It has been suggested that this portrays a version of masculinity grounded in separation and difference.<sup>52</sup> This separation is often seen in the exclusion of 'hearth and home'. The world is a closed one, focused on shipboard life, or in operations rooms. The emphasis is on fulfilling duty and obligation, without distraction.

Shepard therefore is taciturn and driven, devoted to plotting the hunt for the *Bismarck*. This almost stereotypical stiff upper-lipped conduct only mellows at a significant juncture when his son (an observer on a Swordfish aircraft) is believed lost in action. Shepard is reflective of a particular kind of masculinity, his actions a template for behaviour based on duty, restraint and

responsibility. Control, be it physical, emotional, or mastery of technical processes is emblematic of this heroic ideal often seen in 1950s war films. Placing an emphasis on emotional self-control is part of the creation of the appearance of invulnerability, which it has been argued, is central to this type of masculinity.<sup>53</sup> Using this as a template for masculine behaviour does carry a price. Detachment from anything that will deflect from the chief task of war-fighting leads to the kind of 'loneliness of command' that afflicts Ericson in *THE CRUEL SEA*, leading to his temporary loss of emotional control. Wartime films suggest that individuals might be sustained and supported by 'the group'. Post war output is different. With an emphasis on men set apart, marked as 'heroic leaders', the male group is no longer there for mutual support. Leadership, it is shown, involves dealing with problems as an individual in isolation.<sup>54</sup> This is what confronts Shepard, facing the loss of his son.

This event does, however, enable the ostensible role for female characters in the film to be established. Accordingly, WRNS Second Officer Davis exhibits a nurturing, caring personality. This is at once stereotypical, and limiting. The implication is that women's role is to provide the 'listening ear', and provide some focus for emotional concerns to be expressed, not to have an active part to play in prosecuting the war. Once more, this is a departure from the conventions developed across the canon of wartime films, which showed women, if not actively engaged in warlike actions, nonetheless sharing in the sacrifices and hardships.

The narrative shares something with *THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE* in its treatment of the enemy. There is a sharp distinction drawn between the portrayal of Kapitän Lindemann of the *Bismarck*, and his senior officer, Admiral Luetjens. Lindemann is held up as an example of 'the good German', whilst Luetjens is shown to be a Nazi fanatic, concerned principally with achieving the favour of the Fuehrer. In addition, the narrative features the loss of the *Hood*, leading to the suggestion that, with the end of the colonial age and events at Suez, *Hood* was still an emblem of national certainty and pride, its loss symbolic of a past golden age of national confidence.<sup>55</sup>

This combines with the conventions familiar from 1950s output, in the focus on officers, not on the ratings; the sense of the division between the 'leader' and of the 'led'. There is the marginalised role allotted to women, and the idea of a separation between 'good Germans' and Nazis, indicative of the continuing rehabilitation of a former enemy nation. In general, the films foreground a homosocial world, in which officer-heroes must not be distracted from fighting the war. Even when, as Christine Geraghty<sup>56</sup> notes, the strain of this is apparent (as in the case of

Ericson or Shepard) it appears to be the price expected from following that pattern of masculine conduct. The next, and final, chapter will attempt some general conclusions based on the examination of the films undertaken in the preceding sections, and the themes which the films contain.

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  - 2 S.P. MacKenzie, *British War Films 1939-1945: The Cinema and the Services* (London, 2006), p. 139
  - 3 Robert Murphy, *British Cinema*, p.221
  - 4 John Ramsden, 'Re-Focusing The Peoples War', *Journal of Contemporary History* 33, 1 (1998), 35-64, p.59
  - 5 'THE GIFT HORSE', *The Times*, 21 July 1952 (online). Available from <http://infotrac.london.galegroup.com> (Accessed 16 October 2007)
  - 6 S.P. MacKenzie, *British War Films*, p. 139
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  - 9 Neil Rattigan, 'The Last Gasp of the Middle Class: British War Films of the 1950s', in Winston Wheeler Dixon (ed), *Re-viewing British Cinema 1900-1992 Essays and Interviews* (New York, USA, 1994), p. 150
  - 10 Nicholas Pronay, 'The British Post-Bellum Cinema', *Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 8, 1 (1988), 39-54
  - 11 John Ramsden, 'Re-Focusing The Peoples War',
  - 12 Nicholas Pronay, 'The British Post-Bellum Cinema', p.51
  - 13 John Ramsden, 'Re-Focusing The Peoples War', p.47
  - 14 Ibid. p.56
  - 15 Robert Murphy, *British Cinema*, p. 221
  - 16 John Ramsden, 'Re-Focusing The Peoples War', p.36.
  - 17 Sue Harper and Vincent Porter, *British Cinema of the 1950s-The Decline of Deference* (Oxford, 2007), p.255
  - 18 Laurence Kardish, 'Michael Balcon and the Idea of a National Cinema', in Geoff Brown and Laurence Kardish (eds), *Michael Balcon: The Pursuit of British Cinema* (New York, USA, 1984), p.69
  - 19 Martin Francis, 'The Domestication of the Male? Recent Research on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Masculinity', *The Historical Journal* 45, 3 (2002), 637-652, p.645
  - 20 Sue Harper and Vincent Porter, *British Cinema of the 1950s*, p.60
  - 21 Martin Francis, 'The Domestication of the Male', p.645
  - 22 Roger Manvell, *Films and the Second World War* (South Brunswick and New York, USA, 1974), p.321
  - 23 S.P. MacKenzie, *British War Films*, p.142
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  - 25 'THE CRUEL SEA', *The Manchester Guardian*, 28 March 1953, (online). Available from <http://archive.guardian.co.uk> (Accessed 16 October 2007)
  - 26 Sue Harper and Vincent Porter, *British Cinema of the 1950s*, p.255
  - 27 Ibid. p.255
  - 28 Ibid. p.255
  - 29 Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire 1939-1965* (Oxford, 2007), p.91
  - 30 John Ramsden, 'Re-Focusing The Peoples War', p.59
  - 31 See Andrew Spicer, *Typical Men: Representation of Masculinity in Popular British Culture* (London, 2001) Chapter 2 for a discussion of the post-war hegemonic masculine type, including the 'middle-class professional'
  - 32 S.P. MacKenzie, *British War Films*, p. 144
  - 33 Albert Johnson, 'The Key', *Film Quarterly* 12, 1 (1958), 42-43
  - 34 S.P. MacKenzie, *British War Films*, p. 144, n.66
  - 35 'THE KEY', *The Times*, 29 May 1958, (online). Available from <http://infotrac.london.galegroup.com> (Accessed 3 June 2008)
  - 36 Robert Murphy, *British Cinema*, p. 198
  - 37 Nicholas Pronay, 'The British Post-Bellum Cinema', *Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 8, 1 (1988), 39-54, p.51
  - 38 John Ramsden, 'Re-Focusing The Peoples War', p.36, p.46
  - 39 Philip Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda* (Manchester, 2003), p. 222
  - 40 Roger Manvell, *Films and the Second World War*, p.321
  - 41 Andrew Spicer, *Typical Men*, p.35

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- 42 Robert Murphy, *British Cinema* ,p.226
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- 46 John Ramsden, ' Re-Focusing The Peoples War, , p.59
- 47 S.P. MacKenzie, *British War Films* , p.146
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- 49 Martin Francis , 'The Domestication of the Male? Recent Research on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Masculinity', *The Historical Journal* 45, 3 (2002), 637-652, p. 638
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- 51 Andrew Spicer, *Typical Men*, p.201
- 52 Christine Geraghty, *British Cinema in the Fifties : Gender, Genre and the 'New Look'* (Florence, KY, USA., 2000), p.189
- 53 Christine Geraghty, 'Masculinity ' , p.66
- 54 *ibid.* p.65
- 55 Ralph Harrington, 'The Mighty Hood, Navy, Empire, War at Sea, and the British National Imagination, 1920-1960', *Journal of Contemporary History* 38, 2 (2003), 171-185 ,pp183-184
- 56 Christine Geraghty, ' Masculinity', pp.65-.66

## CONCLUSION

Having examined the way that wartime film-makers, and later, post-war film-makers, portrayed the war at sea, this final chapter will attempt to draw some general conclusions. The distinctive nature of naval war films, the way in which both the warlike and domestic are mixed, has been used as a starting-point. Notably this characteristic is something which other commentators have not examined in depth before. (For example, whilst Jonathan Rayner<sup>1</sup> alludes to this distinctive feature, he does not develop the argument). The idea that, within the same place, seafarers can enact a domestic and a warlike role—making toast, then manning the guns — gives rise to an examination of wartime masculinity, which links to ideas of national identity during the conflict, and how this is portrayed on film. In addition, the commonplace portrayals of routine and hardship in naval war films also links to the idea of showing 'the best of the national character' in wartime, and to the propaganda aims of the Ministry of Information. By assessing films dealing with the vital role played by the Merchant Navy the shift in emphases between wartime and post-war naval films is apparent, as the simple fact that the Merchant Navy is never foregrounded as it was during the war is emblematic of the shift away from portraying the 'People's War'. Coinciding with the shift to portraying an 'officer's war' is the emergence in post-war films of a traditionally 'heroic' form of masculinity. Alongside this there is less scope (or perhaps reason) to show the 'domestic' aboard ship. If the focus is on singleminded duty and on carrying out the mission then any distraction from that aim needs to be removed.

During the war, films were used to promote war aims to the nation, and to explain those aims to allies and to neutral nations. The Ministry of Information's responsibility for film propaganda was expressed practically in a number of ways. It sponsored documentary output through the Crown Film Unit and independent producers. It issued guidance to commercial film-makers on the elements of 'good propaganda', whilst encouraging films that showed social consensus. Preference was given to narratives that took a restrained, realistic approach to portraying the war, emphasising the part played by 'ordinary people', men and women alike.

Since the Programme for Film Propaganda was first circulated in January 1940 there was a period in which films adhered largely to the conventions of pre-war cinema. Therefore, in films like *CONVOY* and *SHIPS WITH WINGS* as Andrew Spicer suggests, a code of masculinity based on 'chivalry' and on gentlemanliness is demonstrated, familiar in films from the 1920s and 1930s. When 'ordinary' people are shown it is as "working class cheery buffoon(s)".<sup>2</sup> The narrative focus lies squarely on the heroic leadership of the officer-class. Such remoteness from the later portrayals of a 'People's War', and from 'temperate' masculinity also removes the likelihood of the narratives having the scope to show 'domestic' spaces aboard ship. This in turn adds to the distance between these and naval films made later in the war.<sup>3</sup>

After *SHIPS WITH WINGS* come the films which form the canon of 'critically approved' war films-*THE FOREMAN WENT TO FRANCE, IN WHICH WE SERVE, SAN DEMETRIO LONDON*. These productions also mark a shift in the portrayal of 'ordinary' people, in support of the idea of a 'People's War'. Working class characters are shown with some attempt at realism, and with a more sympathetic touch. Jo Fox has suggested that the use of accented language in films indicates the intention to generate consensus. By using a more realistic range of voices in films, the sense of common purpose was encouraged. Films could show diversity, and suggest an 'all-in-it-together' spirit, without questioning the established class hierarchy.<sup>4</sup> Alongside this is the shift towards portraying 'temperate' masculinity. Formed from the ostensibly opposite characteristics of post First World War 'domestication' and the traditional warrior-as-hero, this was a form of masculine conduct that (it has been argued) came to typify the wartime sense of national identity, as well as the code of behaviour for men. Characterised by being quiet, good-humoured, and home-loving enabled an immediate sense of opposition to 'the enemy' to be formed, as they in contrast were cast as hyper-masculine, and aggressive. (However, in achieving this contrast between the enemy's character and Britishness the pendulum cannot swing too far, as this would lead to a lack of fighting spirit, cowardly behaviour<sup>5</sup> and ultimate defeat). Furthermore, as this code linked to a sense of the national character, it was one which could be adopted in part by women as well. This is evidenced in a number of films, for example *IN WHICH WE SERVE*, where it plain that women are enduring as much on the Home Front under the blitz as the men are at sea. In a more general sense, this also points to the idea of consensus and of equality of sacrifice which the Ministry of Information wished to have promoted. In conditions of Total War everyone was shown to play a part, whether in action, or on the Home Front.

The importance of films fulfilling a propaganda function was clearly no longer required after the end of hostilities, and films took on a different tone. John Ramsden's study <sup>6</sup> points to the ways in which post-war films differ from their wartime counterparts. There is a shift away from the portrayal of the consensus which typifies wartime output. Instead, films revert to a separation between 'leader' and 'led', in a manner akin to films made before the war. Active roles are reserved for officers, and in the most extreme cases, naval ratings in post-war films recede almost to invisibility. Perhaps the most extreme example is *THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE* where the focus is on the officers, not the (largely mute) ratings. Notably, even the Merchant Navy characters (in wartime films shown as less bound by social class and hierarchy) are defined as being 'captains and officers'. There is also a further shift in the way masculinity is enacted. Whilst there is not a complete reversion to pre-war conventions, common elements emerge, with the gentlemanly figure once again to the fore, modified slightly by exposure to the 'People's War'. <sup>7</sup> Conduct is typified by emotional self-control<sup>8</sup> and by absolute focus on the demands of the mission; a single-mindedness noticeable in the character of Shepard played by Kenneth More in *SINK THE BISMARCK!*

As a result of emphasising singlemindedness and duty any distractions from 'the mission' are excluded. Consequently, films do not have the same scope to consider the 'domestic' along with the 'warlike'. In *SINK THE BISMARCK!* because Shepard is focussed on co-ordinating the hunt for the enemy ship it seems incidental that his sleeping quarters are in the command centre. This is much different to the captain in *CLOSE QUARTERS*. He retains the attributes of command yet mulls over a crossword during the mission, whilst his torpedo room crew sleep and eat amongst their weaponry. It is significant that (as with 'temperate masculinity') the distinctive amalgam of 'domestic' and 'warlike' attributes is shown as being maintained in balance. 'The domestic' cannot outweigh the combative. Since wartime films had to fulfil a propaganda function, there has to be an emphasis on taking the fight to the enemy. The cheerfully stoic 'Britain can take it' philosophy might show the best of the national character, but it does not win wars by itself.

Amongst the seeming conformity of post-war narratives, there is in some instances still space to take a harsher and more realistic view of the conflict. In *THE CRUEL SEA* and in *THE KEY* the stereotypical, 'stiff upper-lip' portrayals, for which 1950s war films have been mocked, are noticeably absent. Instead, the viewer is confronted with something of the psychological and emotional effects of warfare. Ericson in *THE CRUEL SEA* becomes progressively hardened,

and is shown burdened by the strains of command. Ross and Ford in *THE KEY* both learn to see fear as the main enemy, and seek refuge in drink. (It has been noted previously how the 'hearth-and-home' references are treated in the film, and how these echo yet differ from wartime treatment). These kinds of portrayals serve as evidence of the price that war exacts, seen not only in terms of death, but in the risk of psychological damage as well.

Despite the problematic aspects inherent in showing women in films concerned with a closed ship-board world, most wartime films include some 'hearth and home' reference. This is used to emphasise the necessity for the whole nation to be involved in prosecuting the war, to link to ideas of what fighting the war will preserve, and to a particular code of masculinity.<sup>9</sup> In post-war films these references recede, if in fact they exist at all. One consequence is to marginalise the contribution of women. Any sense of the 'equality of sacrifice' implicit in wartime depictions is lost. There are, by-and-large no scenes equivalent to those in (for example) *IN WHICH WE SERVE*, where wives and families endure the Portsmouth blitz. Instead, women feature as romantic interest, in the kind of sub-plots identified as intrusive by Roger Manvell<sup>10</sup>, or in scenes of WRNS in operations rooms, clustered around a plotting table. This extremely limited role afforded to women in post-war output has the effect of further emphasising the centrality of the leader as hero, who, has been shown, is identified as being from a particular social class.

MacKenzie suggests that, by 1942, the effect of Total War had resulted in films dispensing with any distinction between 'ordinary' Germans and Nazi zealots.<sup>11</sup> A continuation of this idea is noticeable in *THE GIFT HORSE*, when in the aftermath of the commando raid, the naval prisoners are confronted by a range of harsh, barking Prussian types (demonstrating the continuation of the 'hyper-masculine' enemy of wartime). However, in other ways, the manner of showing the enemy changes appreciably in the post-war era. The re-emergence of the separation between the 'Nazi' and the 'Good German', is demonstrated in a pronounced manner in *THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER PLATE*, for example. As a general trend, this has been attributed to changing world events, with concerns over the Cold War leading to the formation of new alliances, as for instance, the diplomatic efforts to integrate the Federal Republic of Germany into a anti-Soviet defensive pact.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, the changing pattern of events in the wider world has also been cited as forming the prime reason for post-war films' alteration in tone and content. The decline of imperial power, commencing with Indian independence in 1947, culminated in the withdrawal from Suez in 1956, which offered final confirmation of a loss of stature on the world stage. These factors, it

has been suggested, form the background and motivation for the resurgence in production of war films, as an attempt to relive past glories (indeed, features familiar from pre-war imperial adventures became mapped onto the officer-heroes of 1950s war films)<sup>13</sup>, and mythologise the role of the nation in winning the Second World War.

The shift towards portraying an 'officer's war'<sup>14</sup> has been attributed to causes as varied as class conflict, and the availability of source material for film-makers. As has been seen, Neil Rattigan argues that one concern underpins 1950s war films, namely, that the middle class had lost its central position in society as a consequence of the wartime promotion of the 'People's War'. This resulted in a concerted effort by the middle class to reassert itself, which was by the 1950s translated into films that re-fought the war, placing middle class (officers) to the fore.<sup>15</sup> Rattigan's idea is, as noted before, heavily influenced by adherence to Gramscian philosophy. This is not to say that Rattigan's idea is without merit. One might expect that the 1945 Labour election victory would be startling in its effect. Part of this is its link to the wartime belief that a 'People's War' could lead to a 'People's Peace'. The exact degree to which war brought about social change is the source of continuing debate. What is apparent is that avowedly middle class film makers like Michael Balcon felt that they had taken part in a "mild revolution", becoming more socially aware.<sup>16</sup> Given this example, it might not be so implausible to believe that the contrary case could operate as well, with wartime social change seeming to prefigure a lasting loss of primacy for the middle class. By contrast, John Ramsden's suggestion that the ready availability of source materials-officer's memoirs-on which to base screenplays<sup>17</sup> takes war films as part of the wider entertainment medium, including popular books. Ramsden seems to suggest that as the book market was dominated by publications about the war, this provided the inspiration and material to make popular films, which in turn had to reflect the concerns of their sources.

Whether post-war films formed part of a strategy to re-assert the importance of the middle class, were a reflection of readily available source material, or were indicative of a nation attempting consolation in the face of lost pre-eminence, the productions were tremendously popular. Often, this was a view not shared by critics, but, as has been noted before, the public demonstrated their preference, through cinema attendance. Harper and Porter's study has been noted previously, and attributes this popularity to the subject-matter used. They suggest that as the films were often based on real events this, in combination with the 'adventure story' approach made them appealing to father and son audiences, keen for 'nostalgia and

education'.<sup>18</sup> (There are points of congruence in the case of wartime and post-war film where audience taste is concerned. The gulf between critical and popular taste is apparent in the audience response to many wartime films written-off as not being worthy of the canon of quality productions. By using the case of *SHIPS WITH WINGS*, Aldgate and Richards illustrate the point that box-office returns show that popular and critical successes were often very different).<sup>19</sup>

When wartime and post-war cinema is compared it is plain that, in general, the idea of the 'People's War' was modified. Working class men and women in their entirety recede from view. Showing domestic and warlike spaces combined is less apparent whilst there is a similar reversion to showing a traditional notion of heroic masculinity. The heroic leader once again stands apart and the portrayal of a particular kind of masculinity comes to the fore. Nevertheless, at the same time the war film genre could find a place to examine some aspects of the conflict in a way unachievable during the war. However, by the end of the 1950s the low-key, restrained naval war film was replaced by the war 'epic'.

In the 1960s the Mirisch Corporation took the lead in producing films like *ATTACK ON THE IRON COAST*, *HELL BOATS* and *SUBMARINE X-1* which were notable for the presence of American stars. These films cover much the same ground as *THE GIFT HORSE* and *ABOVE US THE WAVES*, without adding anything original to the genre.<sup>20</sup> The cycle would continue for the next 20 years, increasing in scale and in budget. With *WHERE EAGLES DARE* and similar productions, war films moved away almost entirely from attempting realistic or thoughtful portrayals of the conflict. The idea of the 'People's War' and its subsequent modification in post-war films ceases to have relevance when these later films are considered. Instead, the Second World War simply acts as the backdrop to a range of adventure stories, where spectacle is all.

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1 Jonathan Rayner, *The Naval War Film-Genre, History, National Cinema* (Manchester, 2007), p.8

2 Andrew Spicer, *Typical Men: Representation of Masculinity in Popular British Culture* (London, 2001), p.7

3 See Andrew Spicer, *Typical Men* for an examination of the changing portrayals of masculinity during the course of the war, and Sonya O.Rose, 'Temperate Heroes, Masculinity in Second World War Britain', in Stefan Dudink et al (eds), *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History* (Manchester, 2004), pp.177-195 for analysis of the combination of the 'active' and the 'domestic' in wartime masculinity.

4 See Jo Fox, 'Millions like Us? Accented Language and the 'Ordinary' in British Films of the Second World War', *Journal of British Studies* 45, 4 (2006), 819-845 .pp. 839 and 841 for a discussion of this in relation to *IN WHICH WE SERVE*

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- 5 Sonya O.Rose ,*Temperate Heroes*, p.192
  - 6 John Ramsden, „Re-Focusing The Peoples War”,*Journal of Contemporary History* 33, 1 (1998), 35-64
  - 7 Andrew Spicer, *Typical Men*, p.28
  - 8 Christine Geraghty, „Masculinity”, in Geoff Hurd (ed) , *National Fictions: World War Two in British Films and Television* (London, 1984), p.66
  - 9 See Sonya O.Rose, „Temperate Heroes”, pp.177-195
  - 10 Roger Manvell, *Films and the Second World War* (South Brunswick and New York,1974), p.321
  - 11 S.P. MacKenzie, „Nazis into Germans, "Went the Day Well?" (1942) and "The Eagle Has Landed" (1976)”, *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 31 ,2 (2003), 83-92, p.85
  - 12 Ibid.p.87
  - 13 Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire 1939-1965* (Oxford, 2007), p.91
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  - 16 Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It- The British Cinema in the Second World War* ( London, 2007), p.326
  - 17 John Ramsden, „Re-Focusing The Peoples War”, p.36
  - 18 Sue Harper and Vincent Porter, *British Cinema of the 1950s-The Decline of Deference* (Oxford, 2007), p.255
  - 19 Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, p.327
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