

CHANGING REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR IN BRITISH POST-WAR
CINEMA 1946-1960

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Abstract

Post-war British films featuring the Second World War are of considerable cultural significance, their number and enduring popularity evidence of a long-lasting pre-occupation with the war among cinema-goers. Furthermore, an analysis of representation of the war, changes in these representation and consideration of which types of representation proved popular or unpopular, can throw light on the British people's attitudes towards the conflict and changes in such attitudes over time. However, despite their significance these films have received relatively little scholarly attention, leaving largely unchallenged a number of assertions: that representations of the war are confined to a homogenous group of combat-oriented films that began no earlier than 1950; that their popularity was evidence of escapist nostalgia and that British cinema failed both to depict the brutality of war and to explore its ethical dimensions.

This study challenges these assumptions. Discussing just over 100 films, it argues that representations of the war changed noticeably during the period 1946-1960 with a wide range of war and war-related themes being explored, something that becomes clearly apparent when this period is divided into three distinct periods. Furthermore, evidence of films' popularity is used to support the assertion that assumptions of homogeneity spring from a focus on commercially-successful films. It further argues that an analysis of films from the first half of the 1950s reveals a dominant theme of tribute rather than escapist nostalgia and that there is plentiful evidence from the second half of the 1950s of films depicting the brutality of war and exploring its ethical dimensions.

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List of Abbreviations

AA – Anti-Aircraft

ATS – Auxiliary Territorial Service

BBFC – British Board of Film Censors

BFI – British Film Institute

ENSA – Entertainments National Service Association

FANY – First Aid Nursing Yeomanry

GM – George Medal

RAF – Royal Air Force

LDV – Local Defence Volunteer

MC – Military Cross

NA – National Archive

NCO – Non-Commissioned Officer

RN – Royal Navy

RNVR – Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve

SBO – Senior British Officer

SOE – Special Operations Executive

WAAC – women's army Auxiliary Corp

WO – War Office

WRAC – Women's Royal Army Corp

WRNS – Women's Royal Naval service (Wrens)

Introduction

It has been estimated that 'around 75 [British] feature films about the Second World War were produced between 1950 and 1959' establishing the war film as 'a dominant genre of the British cinema' at the time.¹ Another estimate has 85 British films 'in which the war itself played a role in the unfolding of the story' produced during the 15 years that followed the end of the war, 'a substantial number' that ensured that the Second World War 'was seldom absent for more than two or three months from British cinema screens' at this time.² A further estimate is that around 100 British war films were released between 1946 and 1965, making them, low-budget crime thrillers apart, 'easily the biggest single group of British films made in the early post-war period'.³ However, despite their numerical and commercial significance – home-grown war films were consistently among the most popular films of the 1950s – these films have been largely neglected.⁴

This scholarly neglect is surprising as well as disappointing. Cinema was still, at this time, the 'preeminent form of popular entertainment' with the 14.5 million seats sold per week in 1959 exceeding the number of households with a television set.⁵ Furthermore, British cinema was to play a central role in writing the narrative of how the nation had come through this momentous historic event: 'For the first time in cultural history a huge and historic sequence of events was narrated and represented ... on behalf of a whole population, permitting them to judge for themselves whether they came out of it well or badly.'⁶ Indeed, cinema's role in 'defining popular

¹ James Chapman, *War and Film* (London: Reaktion, 2008), p. 198. Michael Paris, *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture, 1850-2000* (London: Reaktion, 2000), p. 225.

² Nicholas Pronay, 'The British Post-bellum Cinema: A Survey of the Films Relating to World War II made in Britain between 1945 and 1960' in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1988, pp. 39-54., p. 39.

³ John Ramsden, 'Refocusing "The People's War": British War Films of the 1950s' in *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 33, No 1 (Jan 1998), pp. 35-63., p. 45.

⁴ Chapman, *War and Film*, pp. 198-9., Chapman, 'Our Finest Hour Revisited: The Second World War in British Feature Films since 1945' in *Journal of Popular British Cinema*, Issue 1, 1998, pp. 63-75., p. 65.

⁵ Ramsden, 'Refocusing "The People's War"', p. 36.

⁶ Chapman, 'Our Finest Hour Revisited', p. 67., Ramsden, 'Refocusing "The People's War"', p. 36., Fred Inglis, 'National Snapshots: Fixing the Past in English War Films' in Ian Mackillop and Neil Sinyard (editors) *British Cinema of the 1950s: A Celebration* (Manchester: Manchester University press, 2003), pp. 35-50., pp. 37-8.

impressions of the war' has an even greater cultural significance when it is remembered that these impressions have, as a result of frequent television screenings, lasted until the present day and that cinematic impressions often take precedence over reality.⁷ Furthermore, it has been suggested that cinema – a 'medium of communication and attitude formation' that 'responds intuitively to issues which rankle in the collective consciousness of its own culture and audience' – enjoyed a 'special relationship' with audiences in the years following the war allowing audiences to relive their wartime experiences and to lay to rest 'the ghosts of the war.'⁸

This lack of critical attention is also unfortunate as it has left largely unchallenged a number of assertions, still being made nearly six decades after they were first put forward, regarding representations of the Second World War on British cinema screens: that the war appeared only in the form of combat-oriented films; that these films were largely homogenous; that their popularity at the time was the result of a widespread nostalgia for an imagined golden age and that British post-war cinema avoided any discussion of the ethics of war.⁹ Indeed, the failure to challenge these assertions has left the 'typical impression' of British war films as containing 'nothing more than a parade of stiff-upper-lipped character stereotypes in familiar and conventional heroic stories.'¹⁰ To investigate these assertions it is necessary not only to cast the net more widely in order to avoid the 'misleading impression of uniformity' that results from focusing narrowly on a handful of films that enjoyed considerable commercial success but also to consider how representations of the Second World War changed during the 15 years following the end of the conflict.¹¹

⁷ Chapman, 'Our Finest Hour Revisited', pp. 67-8.

⁸ Pronay, pp. 39-40., pp. 48-51.

⁹ Lindsay Anderson, 'Get Out and Push!' (1957), reprinted in Paul Ryan (editor) *Never Apologise: The Collected Writings of Lindsay Anderson* (London: Plexus, 2004), pp. 233-251., pp. 236-7. Raymond Durnat, *A Mirror for England: British Movies from Austerity to Affluence* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970), pp. 83-4. Roger Manvell, *Films and the Second World War* (London: JM Dent, 1974), pp. 309-21. Clyde Jeavons, *A Pictorial History of War Films* (London: Hamlyn, 1974), p. 188. Roy Armes, *A Critical History of British Cinema* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1978), pp. 177-9. Jeremy Hovard, *Projecting Britain at War: The National Character in British World War II Films* (North Carolina: McFarland, 2014), pp. 128-157

¹⁰ Chapman, 'Our Finest Hour Revisited', p. 66.

¹¹ Robert Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War* (London: Continuum, 2000), p. 205.

A Review of the Literature

The starting-point for any review of the literature must be the published thoughts of a number of commentators among whom there was, during the 1950s, an apparent sense of unease regarding the large number of war films being made. As early as 1950, the critic and documentary film-maker Paul Rotha expressed concern that the growing number of war films being made might be part of a process of imparting into audiences a 'war mentality' that would ready the nation for yet another war at a time when there were many other perils – 'famine, disease, illiteracy and ignorance' – facing the world.¹² In 1957, the critic and director Lindsay Anderson published an essay that put down a marker for subsequent analysis by film historians in which he condemned British war films on several counts: their failure to present the reality of war in a way that would serve as a warning against future wars; the way they helped to legitimise social division and, significantly, their part in a 'flight from contemporary reality' being engineered by those who owned and controlled the British film industry.¹³ The following year, William Whitebait, film critic of the *New Statesman*, bemoaned British cinema's infatuation with the Second World War and the 'imaginary present' that films had created as an escape from the reality of Britain's declining status in the world.¹⁴

These essays can certainly be seen to have influenced film historians writing during the 1970s. Raymond Durnat in his 1970 exploration of the 'themes, undercurrents and overtones' to be found in films watched by ordinary cinema-goers – 'actual spectators in your actual cinema' – as opposed to films privileged by high-brow critics, identified an element of escapism and nostalgia in films that helped cinema audiences overcome their fears of a third world war by looking back to a war 'which was undoubtedly justified, and over, and won.'¹⁵ His assertion that there was a 'five-year moratorium of war films' following the end of hostilities and his use of the term 'stiff upper lip' films

¹² Paul Rotha, 'Into Battle' in *Public Opinion* 7 April 1950

¹³ Anderson, pp. 236-7.

¹⁴ William Whitebait, 'Bombardment' in *New Statesman* 5 April 1958

¹⁵ Durnat, p. 83.

indicates both a focus on combat-oriented films and a tendency to see them as largely homogenous.¹⁶ He does, however, see films moving in three different directions – although he does not provide many specific examples – by the end of the decade: colourful epics along with militarism on the one hand and anti-war sentiments on the other.¹⁷

Roger Manvell in his 1974 survey of changing depictions of the Second World War across national cinemas spanning Europe, Asia and America, devotes little time to post-war British combat-oriented films, dismissing them as ‘seldom concerned with anything more than war action’ and listing films as disparate as *The Dam Busters* (1955), *Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), *Orders to Kill* (1958) and *Yesterday’s Enemy* (1959) as examples of ‘action or combat films’.¹⁸ Manvell is clearly more concerned with war-related films that explore social issues – *The Years Between* (1946), *Frieda* (1947), *The Small Back Room* (1949) and *The Divided Heart* (1954) – although, surprisingly given the large number of war-related films released in the late 1940s, he asserts that ‘British feature films on the whole left war alone until sufficient time had lapsed to make the subject acceptable again in the light of reflection’.¹⁹

Clyde Jeavons’s sense of regret that the breadth of his 1974 survey of the development of the war film ‘since the cinema began’ prevented a fuller exploration of cinema’s engagement with questions of the ethics of war perhaps explains his dismissal of post-war British war films as adventure stories that did little to explore the moral complexities of war.²⁰ Like Durgnat, he sees the combat-oriented films as largely homogenous and he explains their popularity as a result of nostalgia for ‘a time in the recent past when issues were clear-cut and Britain’s greatness, though under threat,

¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 83-4.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.84.

¹⁸ Manvell, pp. 309-315.

¹⁹ Ibid. pp. 232-240.

²⁰ Jeavons, p. 11. p. 188.

was self-evident and confirmed by victory.²¹ However, he too sees a change apparent – ‘a harsher, more cynical, more realistic tone’ – by the end of the 1950s.²²

Roy Armes in his 1979 attempt to celebrate ‘the very real achievements of British film makers’ devotes little time to post-war British war films, despite acknowledging their popularity, dismissing them as evidence of ‘a reaction against contemporary social change’ and ‘a self-deluding era’s retreat into a cosy never-never land.’²³ Armes also asserts that the war being projected onto British cinema screens ignored its horrors, being ‘devoid of concentration camps and senseless violence’, but concedes that many of these films are underpinned by ‘a belief in man’s abilities and innate decency’.²⁴

Andy Medhurst, in his 1984 attempt ‘to open up ... neglected texts for discussion’, identifies three types of war film: the ‘standard combat’ war film, the anti-war film and the home-front film – terms used to good effect when identifying home-front and anti-war elements in combat films – and uses the term ‘pure adventure stories’ for war films that retreat from any consideration of why the war is being fought.²⁵ Medhurst argues that in the three films he analyses – *Angels One Five* (1952), *The Cruel Sea* (1953) and *The Dam Busters* – there is no evidence of militarism or jingoism, but contends that no British film about the Second World War can be described as anti-war, declaring *The Cruel Sea* to be ‘the closest that British 1950s war films came to making an anti-war statement.’²⁶ In the same collection of essays, Susan Boyd-Bowman drew attention to the way war comedies use humour to explore the

²¹ Jeavons, p. 188.

²² Ibid. p. 203.

²³ Armes, p.2., p. 179.

²⁴ Ibid, pp. 177-9.

²⁵ Andy Medhurst, ‘1950s War Films’ in Geoff Hurd (editor) *National Fictions: World War Two in British Films and Television* (London: BFI, 1984), pp. 35-8., p. 35.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 36.

absurdities of military discipline, identifying a clash between the “ideal”, courage and heroism, and the “real”, most people’s more mundane experience of war.²⁷

In his 1988 essay, Nicholas Pronay further develops the idea of cinema offering insights into the national psyche by asserting that there exists a ‘special relationship between the cinema and its audience during a post-bellum period’ and that in post-war Britain, cinema provided a shell-shocked nation with a means to come to terms with its experiences, even suggesting that at a time of declining church attendance, it was the cinema that offered the British people ‘the opportunity of a weekly spiritual/emotional experience to help them cope with their lives’ and finally put to rest ‘the ghosts of the war.’²⁸ He explicitly broadens his focus to include ‘films relating to World War II’ – films set during the war and in which the war plays a significant part – as well as combat-oriented war films, calculating that over 80 war and war-related films were released in the fifteen-year ‘post-bellum period’, 1945 to 1960.²⁹ Pronay notes that it is films set in the Far East and those concerned with subversion and psychological warfare that engage with the ethical issues surrounding the war and the nature of militarism.³⁰

In his polemical, class-based 1991 essay Neil Rattigan, having previously argued that the “People’s War” films made during the conflict were part of an attempt to trick the working-classes into fighting a war that principally benefited the ruling-classes, asserts that 1950s British war films were part of an attempt by the middle classes – alarmed by the growing power of the working-classes and Britain’s declining prestige – to rewrite the myth of national unity that had grown up during the war years in their favour as a ‘last ditch effort ... to maintain its hegemony’.³¹ Although Rattigan’s

²⁷ Susan Boyd-Bowman, ‘War and Comedy’, in *National Fictions*, pp. 39-42., p. 39.

²⁸ Pronay, p. 51.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 39.

³⁰ Ibid. pp. 45-51.

³¹ Neil Rattigan, *This is England: British Films and the People’s War, 1939-1945* (London: Associated Universities Press, 2001); ‘The Last Gasp of the Middle Class: British War Films of the 1950s’, in Wheeler Winston Dixon, editor, *Reviewing British Cinema, 1900-1992: Essays and Interviews* (Albany: New York University Press, 1994), pp. 143-53., pp.143-50.

analysis is largely textual, he does suggest that this concern on the part of the middle classes contributed to the election of a Conservative government in 1951, a year that he contends – referring to Pam Cook’s assertion that this year saw ‘community spirit giving way to individualism’ – marked a turning point in post-war British society.³²

Jeffrey Richards also identified 1951 as a significant year in his 1997 study of films and British national identity, declaring that ‘having veered leftwards and sanctioned major social changes, the country veered rightwards, settling down to enjoy the fruits of peace and turning its back on social change’, contending that by the early 1950s the era of the working man and woman as hero had peaked, to be followed by a ‘new generic development’ namely ‘the mid-1950s war film, re-creating Britain’s finest hour, but now conspicuously not in terms of the People’s War but as a celebration of the officer class, which had featured in the pre-war cinema.’³³ Significantly, Richards offers a contextual analysis that sees 1950s war films not as a reaction to declining influence abroad and social change at home but as an expression of a new national confidence, arguing that the first half of the 1950s was a time of ‘peace, prosperity and order’, citing pride taken in the conquest of Everest and Roger Bannister’s sub-four-minute mile as evidence that the nation saw itself entering a new Elizabethan age.³⁴

The following year James Chapman highlighted the lack of scholarly attention afforded the British war film of the 1950s as a genre in its own right – being ‘neither lauded nor vilified’ but rather ignored – and pointed to these films’ huge cultural significance.³⁵ Chapman suggests that the enduring popularity of the British war film can be explained by the way that, like the American Western, it deals with constructions of national identity, explorations of codes of masculine behaviour and dramatizations of national myths, and draws attention to the ‘familiar and reassuring presence’ of actors such as

³² Ibid., Pam Cook, ‘Mandy: Daughter of Transition’ in Charles Barr (editor) *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1986), pp. 355-61., p. 355.

³³ Jeffrey Richards, *Films and British National Identity: From Dickens to Dad’s Army* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 135, p. 130., p. 144.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 135.

³⁵ Chapman, ‘Our Finest Hour Revisited’, p. 65., pp. 67-8.

John Mills and Jack Hawkins as British cinema's counterparts to the American Western's iconic leading men such as Gary Cooper and James Stewart.³⁶ In addition, Chapman notes a considerable change in the British war film during the 1960s – 'with a marked shift away from factually-based narratives, which had dominated the genre in the 1950s, towards pure fiction which foregrounded "Boys Own"-style heroics' – asserting a clear demarcation between the 1950s war film and its 1960s counterpart that further strengthens the argument for concluding this study at 1960.³⁷

That same year John Ramsden also noted the lack of critical interest in British war films despite the large number released between 1945 and 1965 and contrasted the 'lukewarm or negative' reception given to them in the 'high-brow journals' with a 'different story' to be found in the trade press and the various star surveys.³⁸ Ramsden argues that British war film should be viewed in the context of the popular literature of the time in which books – some of them published in editions specially adapted for children – and comics were 'projecting an essentially exciting picture of the then recent war as a great game', asserting that films were 'reinforcing a general image of the war in popular culture' rather than creating their own.³⁹ Anticipating SP MacKenzie's detailed study of the involvement of the Services in the production of British war films, Ramsden notes that 'many of these films could not have been made without the active co-operation of the services' in terms of equipment and technical expertise and asserts that it is likely that such assistance came with a price, in the form of Service influence, because 'no doubt leverage could quite easily have been applied had they wanted changes to be made.'⁴⁰

Like Richards, Ramsden suggests there was a mood of national optimism in the 1950s with the British people enjoying, Suez notwithstanding, 'their most collectively

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 72-3.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 67.

³⁸ Ramsden, 'Refocusing the People's War', pp. 45. pp. 40-3.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 36-7.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp.51-2.

confident period since the war', seeing the production of 'films about British heroism and ingenuity' as a reflection of this optimism.⁴¹ Ramsden dismisses suggestions that 1950s war films were, with their 'officers-as-heroes and other-ranks-as-comic-figures', a betrayal of the spirit of the People's War, asserting that this was simply a reflection of a change in public mood: 'It is more likely that it was a matter of film-makers sharing in the overall change of mood that took place between the middle years of the war and the mid-1950s.'⁴² Significantly, Ramsden identifies 'the seeds of subversion', which were to 'overwhelm the genre' after 1960, in some of the comedy films from the late 1950s.⁴³

In the most comprehensive discussion of the post-war British war film to date, Robert Murphy divides his analysis of the period 1945 to 1960 into two sections: films that explore the 'dark legacies' of the war – discussing films that explore difficulties in readjusting to the peace and more hard-edged films dealing with special operations – and films that celebrate the country's finest hour, where he notes that the wide range of films produced makes grouping them difficult.⁴⁴ Although not fully in agreement with Pronay's assertion that films could exorcise the ghosts of war, he agrees that the war was ever present during the 1950s in people's memories and in the bombed-out buildings around them and that even for those who were born after the war it 'was an endless subject of excitement and adventure' and that war films gave veterans 'an opportunity of reliving and coming to terms with' their experiences of war.⁴⁵ In addition, Murphy identifies a change of mood apparent by the end of the 1950s with films that present a 'more cynical, less gentlemanly' pursuit of war.⁴⁶ Noting the movement away from the populism of the wartime films towards a celebration of the officer class, Murphy offers a compelling argument that the actors playing officers in the 1950s had a much broader appeal than some of their predecessors and that

⁴¹ Ibid., p.46.

⁴² Ibid., p. 56.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 60.

⁴⁴ Robert Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, pp. 179-238.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 204-5.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

cinema audiences at the time were less concerned with issues of class than film historians might assume:

But if the 1950s war films are skewed towards the middle class, their emphasis on courage and personal heroism meant that issues around class tended to be submerged. The concentration on active service and the use of actors like Jack Hawkins and Kenneth More, whose gritty or breezy professionalism was less alienating than the clipped suavity of Clive Brook or Noel Coward, steered the films away from the dangerous waters of class and made them acceptable to working-class men and boys.⁴⁷

Murphy contests any suggestion that these films celebrated war, seeing their popularity as evidence of a fascination with 'the myths around Britain's achievement in the Second World War rather than as a celebration of war as such', asserting that few film romanticise or glamorise war and that: 'It is to the credit of British cinema (and the society it grew out of) that so few of the films made in the key period between 1945 and 1960 were exploitative and xenophobic, and how many of them are enlightening, honourable and moving.'⁴⁸

In 2002 Stephen Guy challenged the view that 'film-makers and audiences, sick and tired of war, turned their back on the subject' of war in the years immediately following the cessation of hostilities, resulting in 'cinema screens [being] devoid of war-related subjects' during the period 1946 to 1950.⁴⁹ Discussing a range of films containing 'significant war and aftermath narratives', Guy concludes that, contrary to prevailing assumptions, 'the war and its consequences were ever-present topics on British cinema screens' in films largely concerned with the war's 'impact and consequences'.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 205.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 233-6.

⁴⁹ Stephen Guy, *After Victory: Projections of the Second World War and its Aftermath in British Feature Films, 1946-1950* (Unpublished Thesis: Queen Mary, University of London, 2002), p. 5, p. 39.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 39., p. 194., p. 196

Three studies of gender and class, published between 2000 and 2003, raise interesting points regarding post-war British war films. Christine Gerahty sees them as aimed specifically at male audiences seeking to explore and resolve anxieties about changing male roles – ‘challenges to male strength, endurance and courage’ – and, ultimately, to offer reassurance.⁵¹ In his study of representations of masculinity in British cinema, Andrew Spicer identifies a number of types associated with the pre-eminent actors of British post-war cinema: the ‘meritocratic professional officer’ (John Mills and Jack Hawkins), the ‘debonair aesthete’ (Dirk Bogarde), the ‘Edwardian hero revisited’ (Kenneth More) and ‘Blimps, neurotics and victims’ (Trevor Howard and Alec Guinness).⁵² Philip Gillet in his study of representations of the working class in British cinema suggests that officers are inevitably portrayed as middle class because portrayals of working-class officers ‘would disrupt the social hierarchy’, and that emotional reticence, and its implication of self-control, is associated with the upper-middle and upper classes.⁵³ Interestingly, Gillet is the only writer to suggest, by virtue of a statistical analysis, that the importance of the post-war British war film has been exaggerated.⁵⁴

Accusations of war-mongering in British war films are further challenged in two studies published between 2003 and 2005. Fred Inglis suggests these ‘extraordinary films’ served to pass on ‘the moral inheritance of war and peace’ to future generations, asserting that they were ‘stories common to the social memory which embody principles to live by and ideals to live for.’⁵⁵ In addition, Amy Sargeant, in her survey of British cinema, argued that ‘it would be a mistake to suggest that there was an appetite for nothing more than obvious or partisan heroics’, asserting that many films of the period ‘genuinely engage with questions of war and its aftermath.’⁵⁶

⁵¹ Christine Gerahty, *British Cinema in the 1950s: Gender, Genre and the “New Look”* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 175., p. 178.

⁵² Andrew Spicer, *Typical Men: The Representation of Masculinity in Popular British Cinema* (London: IB Taurus, 2003), pp. 28-46

⁵³ Phillip Gillet, *The British Working Class in Postwar Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 35., pp. 28-9.

⁵⁴ Ibid. p.26.

⁵⁵ Inglis, p. 41., p. 46.

⁵⁶ Amy Sargeant, *British Cinema: A Critical History* (London: BFI, 2005), p. 208.

The issue of Services assistance to film-makers is further developed in S P MacKenzie's survey of the involvement of the British Armed Services in British cinema. Noting that the three branches of the Services, mindful of publicity opportunities, had maintained their public relations apparatus after the war, he draws attention to the standard RAF contract, whereby – in return for assistance in the form of advice, hardware and manpower – the Service retained the right to insist on cuts to the film footage, pointing out that whenever applications had been made to the Army for assistance 'Major-General A. C. Shortt, Director of Public Relations, made sure that the shooting script provided to the War Office presented the army in a positive light before committing to provide facilities.'⁵⁷ In a separate, but related, essay, MacKenzie explores the problems encountered by the producers of *Dunkirk* (1958) in obtaining assistance from the Services for a film that the War Office feared might present the Army in a bad light.⁵⁸

Returning to the subject of British war films of the 1950s in his 2007 study of the relationship between Britain and Germany, John Ramsden points to a growing tendency during the decade to present 'more rounded characterisations' of Germans, but notes that this trend did not please everyone: '[T]he short journey from *The Wooden Horse* to *Colditz* marked a relaxation of hatred, and made some viewers uncomfortable in the process'.⁵⁹ Identifying *The Battle of the River Plate* (1957) and *Ill Met by Moonlight* – 'twins in the subversion of wartime stereotypes' – and *The One That Got Away* (1957) as further examples of this trend, Ramsden describes directors Guy Hamilton, Michael Powell and Roy Baker as 'enlightened film-makers'.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ S.P. MacKenzie, *British War Films 1939-1945: The Cinema and the Services* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), p. 129., p. 132.

⁵⁸ MacKenzie, 'Victory from Defeat: The War Office and the Making of *Dunkirk* (Ealing Films, 1958)' in *War, Literature and the Arts* 15 (2004), pp. 241-57.

⁵⁹ Ramsden, *Don't Mention the War: The British and the Germans since 1890* (London: Abacus, 2007), pp. 302-3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 308., p. 324.

In 2008 James Chapman identified three broad ways in which war can be represented on screen – as spectacle, tragedy and adventure – locating 1950s war films as, by and large, adventure films.⁶¹ Estimating that around 75 films about the Second World War were produced in Britain during the 1950s, he notes that unenthusiastic critical response to these films was confounded by their popularity with audiences.⁶² In addition, he suggests that it was competition from the small-screen that was driving the change in the character of war films from the ‘sober realism’ of the 1950s to the ‘all-out spectacle’ of the 1960s.⁶³

Michael Boyce’s 2012 study of the influence of the Second World War on post-war British cinema between 1945 and 1955 examines the way in which social changes brought about by the war can be seen to be reflected on the cinema screen. However, Boyce largely avoids war and war-related films from the post-war period, exploring only one – *The Captive Heart* (1946) – in a study of just over twenty post-war films. Although the effects of the war can be seen in the bomb-damaged streets in which children play in *Hue and Cry* (1947) and the bomb shelters in which fugitives take refuge in *It Always Rains on Sundays* (1947) and *Odd Man Out* (1947), it is difficult to conclude that the war itself plays a major part in these films. In addition, his claim that in post-war British cinema ‘the war is curiously, although not totally, absent’ and that ‘any real talk about the war is rare’ and his assertion that stories of returning servicemen ‘so popular in postwar American cinema, are largely missing’ ignores the many films that deal with post-war disruption including at least half-a-dozen made soon after the war that feature returning servicemen.⁶⁴

Jeremy Havardi, in his 2014 study of depictions of national character in British Second World War films, acknowledges that representations of the war changed over the post-war period. However, his relatively brief coverage of war-related films from the

⁶¹ Chapman, *War and Film*, p. 11., p. 199.

⁶² Ibid., pp. 198-9.

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 202-3.

⁶⁴ Michael W. Boyce, *The Lasting Influence of the War on Postwar British Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 3.

late 1940s and similarly brief discussion of a handful of films from the late 1950s that are presented as aberrations from the mainstream, serve largely to bookend his more detailed discussion of what he terms 'the true heyday of the patriotic war film', in which he largely rehearses the narrative established during the 1970s – Durnat, Jeavons and Armes – in which the popularity of war films is explained by an obsessive, escapist nostalgia for a 'mythic golden age'.⁶⁵

A canon of war films

Murphy has argued that film historians have focused their attention on a small group of commercially successful and critically acclaimed films and that this has led to an assumption that post-war British war films were largely homogenous.⁶⁶ In an essay about 1970s television, Martyn Jackson, while setting out to rescue British war films from their apparent final resting place as entertainment suitable only for a rainy Sunday afternoon, identifies a number of films that appear to have further cemented their place in the national consciousness as a result of frequent screening on television.⁶⁷ Significantly, as will become apparent, all the films he mentions – *The Wooden Horse*, *Angels One-Five*, *The Cruel Sea*, *Albert RN*, *The Colditz Story*, *The Dam Buster*, *Above Us the Waves*, *Reach for the Sky*, *The Battle of the River Plate*, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, *Carve Her Name with Pride*, *Dunkirk*, *Ice Cold in Alex*, *Sea of Sand* and *Sink the Bismarck!* – not only achieved significant box-office success but were also enjoyed largely by inclusive, family audiences: something entirely in keeping with repeated television screenings during the 1970s. It is also significant that, while several other films have been mentioned in the various books, articles and essays concerned with post-war British films that deal with the Second World War written from the 1970s onwards, it is the films referred to in Jackson's article that have largely dominated discussions of representations of the Second World War in post-war British cinema. Furthermore, this group of films, as will also become apparent, share certain similarities in terms of their content and character: all can be described as combat-

⁶⁵ Havardi, p. 127., pp. 129-30, p. 158.

⁶⁶ Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, p. 205.

⁶⁷ Martyn Jackson, 'Black and White Army: The British at War', *Classic Television* Issue 2, December 1996/January 1997, pp. 28-35.

oriented films, all can be described as war-as-adventure films and most feature the sort of chivalric heroes that featured so prominently during the first half of the decade in particular.

The Approach of this Study

This study takes the hundred-plus appearances of the Second World War – in combat-oriented war films (those that feature either combat, Military Intelligence or attempts to escape from prisoner-of-war camps) and war-related films (non-combat films in which the war plays a major part, many of which deal with the after-effects of war), as well as war comedies and wartime romances – in British films released between 1946 and 1960 and groups these films according to their treatment of and attitude towards the war, the themes developed and their genre. When these groupings are considered chronologically, it becomes apparent that not only was the Second World War represented in many different ways on British cinema screens during this period, but that these representations changed noticeably over time. Indeed, it can be seen that these changing representations can be divided into three distinct, albeit slightly overlapping, periods. Between 1946 and 1951, there are over 30 war-related films, many of which deal with the aftermath of war with returning servicemen attempting to adjust to peacetime and couples experiencing difficulties after an enforced separation. The period 1952 to 1955 consists mainly of combat-oriented war films in which the dominant theme is that of tribute to those who fought and sometimes died in the service of their country. These films present an idealised picture of the British at war and largely avoid any explicit exploration of the ethics of war. The years 1956 to 1960 see the release of many films that present a much bleaker picture of the war along with films that challenge many of the underlying assumptions and the conventions of previous films. Films released after 1960 exhibit sufficient differences from earlier films – an emphasis on spectacle and an abandonment of documentary realism – to justify this year as the end-point of the study.

In short, this study asserts that not only can these films reveal something about the nation's collective memory of and attitudes towards the Second World War, but that the changing nature of these films reveals a discernible change in this collective memory and attitude. As such, it takes as its starting point Pronay's assertion that British films from the period 1945 to 1960 can reveal a great deal about the way the British people came to terms with the experience of living through the war and adjusting to the post-war world and, by focusing on the change in the way in which the war was represented, builds on Pronay's work to show how representations of the war passed through three distinct phases during these fifteen years. It also follows Pronay in explicitly including war-related films – the major form of representation of the war during the first phase – as well as combat-oriented war films. Like Havardi, it asserts that the nature of representations of the Second World War changed over time, and builds on this by developing a much fuller analysis of films from the late 1940s and late 1950s.

As with Murphy, this study considers all war and war-related films as worthy of inclusion regardless of perceived artistic merit, and its focus on change enables it to build on Murphy's work by showing how the dark undercurrents he identifies in post-war British war and war-related films can be found in the first and third phases but are almost entirely absent during the early 1950s. In addition, this study's inclusion of information about the films' production and reception histories provides an explanation as to why there has been, as Murphy suggests, an assumption of these films' homogeneity based on a narrow focus on a small group of commercially successful films. This study also picks up on Chapman's and Ramsden's references to the films' popularity, identifying which types of film proved popular and unpopular and seeking to identify the likely make-up of audiences in terms of age, gender and social class.

Focussing on changing representations of the war also enables this study to contextualise and build upon a number of other observations and assertions. Firstly, building on the work of Pronay and Guy, it becomes clear that any suggestion the war was absent from British cinema screens in the immediate post-war period – Durgnat, Manvell and Boyce – can hold only if the analysis is confined solely to combat-oriented films. Secondly, the reappearance in British films of the chivalric hero – Spicer and Richardson – can be seen to have occurred during the early 1950s and, although facing a sustained challenge, this character enjoyed considerable affection from British cinema-goers throughout the decade. Thirdly, it is possible to develop more fully the often-vague assertions made by several writers – Durgnat, Jeavons, Murphy, Ramsden and Havardi – that some sort of change occurred in the nature of war films during the second half of the 1950s.

As well as building on the work of previous writers, this study also challenges a number of assumptions and assertions. Firstly, the assumption of homogeneity – Manvell and Durgnat – is countered by showing the wide range of representations of the Second World War in war and war-related films released over the fifteen-year period. Secondly, the assertion that post-war British war films provided nothing more than escapist nostalgia at a time of social upheaval when Britain was losing its influence on the world stage – Durgnat, Jeavons, Armes and Havardi – is countered by showing that the primary focus of films from the early 1950s, and several later films that continued in this tradition, was that of paying tribute to the men and women who had fought, and sometimes died, in the defence of their country. Thirdly, the assertion that post-war British war films avoided any exploration of the moral complexities of war – Jeavons and Armes – is countered by showing that a number of films from the second half of the 1950s show the war to be brutal and that some of these films can be said to make anti-war statements.

Methods and Sources – Contextual Cinematic History

It has been suggested that film history can take four basic approaches: aesthetic, technological, economic and social.⁶⁸ Aesthetic film history, said to be characterised by the 'masterpiece tradition', involves selecting films for 'examination and evaluation according to criteria of aesthetic excellence or significance', while technological and economic film history involves, respectively, identifying 'an evolutionary chain of technological success stories' and investigating the development of the film industry 'as a business and economic institution'.⁶⁹ This study takes the social film history approach and is underpinned by the belief that films 'somehow reflect the desires, needs, fears and aspirations of a society at a given time' and that films are cultural documents that offer 'a unique source of insight into national cultures' in the form of 'reflections of the values and beliefs of a society ... or windows into the national psyche'.⁷⁰ As such, films will not be selected for study according any notions of aesthetic criteria, nor will economic and technological developments take central place in the analysis.

However, while there can be no doubting that cinema can reveal much 'about people and their beliefs, their assumptions and their attitudes, their hopes and fears and dreams', there remains the question as to whether the film historian's interpretation or reading of a film, or group of films, accords with that of either the people involved in the making of the film – screenwriters, directors, producers, actors – or the audiences that watched the film at the time of their release.⁷¹ Clearly, there is a danger of the film historian assuming that their own reading of a film is that which has been

⁶⁸ Robert C Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History Theory and Practice* (Boston, McGraw-Hill, 1985), p. 37.

⁶⁹ Ibid. pp. 67-8., p. 110., p. 131.

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 154., pp. 157-8.

⁷¹ Jeffrey Richards, *Visions of Yesterday* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. i.

termed the 'privileged reading', that is 'the definitive reading, and the reading that an ideal audience would perceive.'⁷²

This study follows the approach of contextual cinematic history/contextualised film history, an approach to social film history, rooted firmly in the belief that 'a study of the cinema can reveal much about, for instance, popular attitudes and ideals', that is able to counter accusations that the film historian's conclusions are based solely on their own, possibly speculative, readings of films, in that:

It deals not in pure speculation but in solid research, the assembling, evaluation and interpretation of facts, the relating of films to the world, the search for an understanding through the medium of popular films of the changing social and sexual roles of men and women, the concepts of work and leisure, class and race, peace and war, the real determinants of change and continuity in the real world.⁷³

In addition, another feature of this approach is that in its recognition that film-makers respond to what they believe audiences want to see, contextual cinematic history/contextualised film history moves beyond the 'reflectionist approach', whereby films are seen literally to reflect, or mirror, the societies that produce and consume them.⁷⁴ Instead, films are considered as representations, events depicted in a way that film-makers believe will capture the public mood. As such, the study of the films themselves – primarily in terms of their content – along with audiences' reactions to these films can reveal both the issues that concerned audiences at various times and the ways with which audiences liked these issues to be dealt.

Following this approach, crucial insights into the nature of societies for which films and groups of films were produced can be gained by: firstly, analysing the structure and

⁷² James Chapman, Mark Glancy and Sue Harper, *The New Film History: Sources, Methods and Approaches* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 181.

⁷³ Richards, *Visions of Yesterday*, p. i., Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Best of British: Cinema and Society from 1930 to the Present*, New Edition (London: IB Tauris, 2002), p. 8.

⁷⁴ Chapman, *Film and History* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 95.

meaning of the film; secondly, placing the film in its industry, social and political context; thirdly, assessing audience reaction to the films.⁷⁵ In short, this approach involves the use of primary sources related to the production and reception of films and places them in their historical context.

As part of the process of analysing these films, information regarding the production of these films is used in order to establish both the intentions of film-makers and the constraints under which they were working. In addition, information regarding the films' reception is used to establish whether or not films were popular with audiences, the likely composition of audiences and what audiences, and to some extent critics, might have thought about the films.

In terms of the films' production history, although dialogue has been taken directly from the films, scripts have been analysed to identify significant changes made during the process of film-making. In addition, some scripts have provided additional information about characters and instructions as to the effects to be achieved when shooting particular scenes. Additional insights into the making of films have been gained from the archived papers of directors and producers and also from the memoirs and autobiographies of actors, directors and producers. Press-books too have been used to elicit additional information about filming and indications as to how the film can be read. In addition, information regarding the influence of the British Board of Film Censors on the making of several films has been gathered from scenario reports and documents relating to the assistance given to film-makers by the various branches of the Services have provided additional information relating to the production of a handful of films.

⁷⁵ Aldgate and Richards, *Best of British*, p. 11.

In terms of the films' reception history, the end-of-year rankings assembled by *Kinematograph Weekly* – based on a mixture of industry knowledge and figures provided by independent exhibitors – have been used to ascertain which films, and significantly which types of film, proved popular and unpopular with audiences. These represent the most reliable estimates of audience popularity at this time and were considered essential reading by film exhibitors for whom accurate information about the types of film audiences wanted to watch was a matter of business success or failure.⁷⁶ Throughout this period, the paper indicated a first-division and second-division in terms of box-office takings as well as indicating that certain films, while outside the top-flight of money-makers, had contributed to the overall earnings of their respective production companies. However, as the terminology used varied, the terms “outstanding success”, “major success” and “minor success” are used to indicate that the film was placed, respectively, in the first-division, second-division or third division. In order to construct a likely age profile of audiences, the BBFC certificates, “U” (suitable for family audiences) and “A” (suitable for adult audiences) – although it should be noted that children could view an “A” film if accompanied by an adult – have been supplemented by the more sophisticated advisory ratings provided by *Kinematograph Weekly* (NC, not for children; C, suitable for children; CC, good for children) and *Monthly Film Bulletin* (A, adults only; B, adults and adolescents aged thirteen and over only; C, family audiences; D, children aged seven and over) as part of their reviews. The trade papers *Today's Cinema*/*Daily Film Renter*/*Daily Cinema* and *Kinematograph Weekly* have been used to construct a picture of the likely audience in terms of gender and class: the most frequently used terms being ‘feminine angle/feminine appeal’ to indicate that the film will appeal to women and ‘general audiences’ to indicate that the film will appeal to both working-class and middle-class audiences.

Although in one sense problematic – reviewers writing in the quality press have been shown to have subscribed largely to a narrow and arguably unrepresentative view

⁷⁶ Janet Thumim, ‘The “Popular”, Cash and Culture in the Post-war British Cinema Industry’ in *Screen*, Volume 32 Number 3 (Autumn 1991), pp. 245-271., pp. 248-251.; Phil Swern, *The Guinness Book of Box Office Hits* (London: Guinness Publishing, 1995), p.4.

about what constitutes a good film, namely the privileging of characteristics such as truth, reality, logic and beauty in the so-called 'quality film' – reviews taken from a mix of quality and popular newspapers and journals have been used to identify aspects of films that might have held a particular appeal, or lack of appeal, for audiences.⁷⁷ Press reviews, along with press-books, have also been used to identify a film's possible appeal to particular audience segments.

Political, Social, Economic and Cultural Context

It is beyond the scope of this study to provide a detailed political and social analysis of post-war Britain. However, as cinematic representations of the Second World War changed significantly over the fifteen-year period under consideration, a brief sketch of the main events will prove instructive. 1945 saw the Labour party win a landslide victory but dreams of building a "New Jerusalem" were beset by economic crises and shortages of consumer goods that resulted in the continuation of rationing. Soon after the end of the war, there began a process of decolonisation that some viewed as evidence of Britain's decline as a world power. Following an indecisive first election, the Conservative party, at that time led by the wartime leader Winston Churchill, was elected to power in 1951 and would stay there until 1964, a period of considerable political and social change. The early 1950s, with the Festival of Britain and the coronation of Elizabeth II, was seen by some as the dawning of a new "golden age", while the Suez crisis of late 1956 is generally considered a turning point, marking both the end of Britain's self-image as a world power and a decline in the nation's deference towards its leadership. It is to be expected that such trends would be seen reflected in films of the period. However, it is quite possible that changes in national mood might be detected early by cinema in films that anticipate, rather than simply react to, events generally held to be turning points or defining moments. In this respect it is instructive

⁷⁷ John Ellis, 'The Quality Film Adventure: British Critics and the Cinema 1942-1948', in Andrew Higson (editor) *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema* (London: Cassell, 1996), pp. 66-93., p. 67.

to consider the time delay between a film's inception and its appearance on the screen.

The machinations of the film industry need to be considered, although the history of the various production companies and the role of the British government in the promotion or otherwise of the British film industry is beyond the limits of this study. However, there is good reason to consider the "Rank v. Balcon" dichotomy – with Rank 'trying to secure a slice of the US market for himself with the production of expensive, prestige films, most of them devoid of a sense of national identity' set against Ealing's twenty-five years of films which, as the famous plaque declared, projected Britain and the British character – might be an oversimplification.⁷⁸ However, a war film aimed at an American as well as British market would likely display noticeable differences from one aimed first and foremost at the British market and it is clear that Michael Balcon was convinced that Ealing was more likely to be successful with 'films that were genuinely British' and had resisted the temptation to boost *The Cruel Sea's* chances of success in the US by casting 'box-office stars' in what he considered an essentially character-driven story of the war's 'effect on the people it involved.'⁷⁹ In addition, as war films were popular with audiences at a time when audience numbers were falling, the evolution of war films can be seen, in part, as an attempt to find a new angle on a winning formula.

A key reference point for war and war-related films from the post-war period is the body of films produced during the war as the later films can, in various ways, be seen both as a departure from and a continuation of the conventions of these earlier films. A key feature of wartime films was the "People's War" spirit, with people from different social classes and different parts of Britain shown pulling together in order to defeat a common enemy. Many of the later war films, certainly from the early 1950s, with their focus on the officer class, can be seen as a dramatic departure from the

⁷⁸ Geoffrey Macnab, *J. Arthur Rank and the British Film Industry* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 111. Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios* (London: Cameron and Tayleur 1977), p. 7.

⁷⁹ BFI Library, Michael Balcon Collection H/32, memo 'The Cruel Sea' (7/11/52)

populism of the war years. The other key feature of wartime films was the “wartime wedding” of the traditions of the fictional narrative film and the documentary movement, and it should be noted that some but not all aspects of the documentary movement are very much in evidence in post-war British war films.

Although this study is primarily concerned with the content rather than the style of the films considered, it is worth noting that the visual style employed in a number of films considered can be described as expressionist or *film noir*: terms which are often used interchangeably. Given that films exhibiting such a visual style have been associated with both a sense of social dislocation – even an anticipation of National Socialism and a recreation of the horrors of shell-shock – in post-First-World-War Germany, and a sense of male dislocation in post-Second-World-War America – specifically, ‘maladjusted veterans’ and their ‘traumatic readjustment to peace and civilian life’ in the form of ‘fears of male displacement’ as a result of ‘wartime changes in the role of women’ – the appearance of expressionist/film noir visual iconography is significant.⁸⁰ Indeed, as this visual iconography is used to reinforce thematic darkness, the appearance (late 1940s), disappearance (early 1950s) and reappearance (late 1950s) of expressionist/film noir visual style can help to track changing themes and moods over the fifteen-year period.

The study will be divided into three sections. The first – A Time of Anxiety: Living in the Shadow of War – will examine the way in which during the years 1946 to 1951 the majority of films reflect an underlying anxiety about the after-effects of the war. The second – A Time of Tribute: Constructing a Wartime Narrative – will examine the way in which during the years 1952 to 1955 the majority of films are concerned with the writing of a somewhat idealised account of the British serviceman fighting a war that appears, on the surface, to be lacking in horror. The third – A Time of Reflection:

⁸⁰ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, reprinted from the 1947 edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966); Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Andrew Spicer, *Film Noir* (London: Longman, 2002), pp. 20-21.

Depictions of the Brutality of War, Explorations of the Ethics of War and Less-idealised Depictions of the British at War – will examine the way in which during the years 1956 to 1960 many films present the war as brutal, explore the ethics of war, turn away from the idealised depictions of the British serviceman at war and depart from the conventions of authenticity.

Part One – A Time of Anxiety: Living in the Shadow of War, 1946 to 1951

Introduction

When war-related films are added to combat-oriented war films there are over 30 appearances of the Second World War – most in the form of war-related films – on British cinema screens between 1946 and 1951. Clearly, assumptions that the war disappeared from British cinema screens in the immediate post-war period hold only if the analysis is restricted to the few combat-orientated war films from this period.⁸¹ In these films the prevalent mood is one of anxiety. Several melodramas explore the question of whether, for couples, life can ever be the same again after years of separation and the consequences of war injury, while others question whether Europe can embrace peace after years of war: this will be the subject of Chapter 1. Several thrillers explore, in the context of a post-war crime wave, the question of whether returning servicemen will be able to adjust to a peace-time world, one explores directly the issue of war neurosis and others suggest that the war still has the power to disrupt people's lives: this will be the subject of Chapter 2. A sense of anxiety is also present in a brief revival of the espionage thriller in which British Intelligence only just succeeds in thwarting the Germans and in some, though not all, of the earliest combat-oriented war films of the post-war period: this will be the subject of Chapter 3.

⁸¹ Durnat, p. 83., Manvell, p. 232. p. 236., Boyce, p.3.

Chapter One - Melodramas

1.1 Unexpected homecomings – *The Captive Heart*, *The Years Between* and *Piccadilly Incident*

They came home in various moods ... Some came home cheerful, hopeful and raring to get back into civvy street ... We put flags up for them, we had parties for them, but the boys that came back were not the boys who went away. They were men. Different men with different ideas, and they found us different too. The shy young girls they left behind became women, strong useful women with harder hearts and harder hands capable of doing jobs that men never dreamed that women could do.⁸²

Written some years after the end of the war, these comments by Margaret Wadsworth from Blackpool capture something of the tensions facing couples looking to resume their lives together after the war. As one historian of post-war Britain has pointed out, a severe strain was placed on marriages when men, expecting to resume their place as the head of the household, returned to newly-independent women, something seen reflected in the substantial increase in the divorce rate during and after the war.⁸³

Three films released during 1946 – *The Captive Heart* (1946), *The Years Between* and *Piccadilly Incident* (1946) – explore reasons why couples might be unable to pick up where they had left off: suspicions of infidelity; profound change in one or other partner; physical injury; couples having wed in haste following whirlwind romances; an inability to adjust to changing circumstances or simply the passage of time. All three films appear to speak to a fear that the experience of wartime separation would prove so disruptive that, as a character in one of the films constantly asserts, things could never be the same again.

Captive Heart follows the fortunes of a group of men of the British Expeditionary Force captured in 1940 and held in a prisoner-of-war camp until their repatriation shortly before the war's end. As well as scenes of daily life in the camp, the film explores, through flashbacks and scenes from the home front – the details of which are

⁸² Quoted in Julie Summers, *Stranger in the House* (London: Pocket Books, 2009), pp. 45-6.

⁸³ David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain 1945-51: Tales of a New Jerusalem* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), p. 97.

conveyed by letter –some of the men’s experience of separation from their loved ones. At first a note of pessimism is sounded as it appears unlikely that the men will be able to return to the lives and loves they once knew. In particular, the romances of two officers captured early in the war seem unlikely to survive until their repatriation. When Lennox (Gordon Jackson) discovers that he will never regain his sight, he decides to break off his engagement to Elspeth, to whom he had proposed as the train taking him to war pulled away from the station, as he believes it unfair to expect her to nurse an invalid, and the readiness of Harley (Michael Bond) to believe false allegations of infidelity made against his wife, Caroline, who he had married hours before setting off for war after a whirlwind romance, appear to have destroyed her faith in him. In addition, one of the men, Evans (Mervyn Johns), learns that his wife has effectively sacrificed her own life in order to give birth to a much longed-for child. However, the film ends optimistically. Elspeth is delighted that her fiancé has returned to her, Caroline is prepared to forgive her husband his mistrust of her and Evans meets his daughter for the first time. In addition, the reunion of Horsfall (Jack Warner) and his wife – particularly his comment that her now grey hair suits her – seems to suggest that relationships can survive long periods of separation.

Although the film has an air of documentary realism, it also contains a less authentic storyline involving a Czech officer assuming the identity of a dead British officer to avoid the attentions of the Gestapo who finds that he develops a bond with the dead man’s wife through their exchange of letters. This storyline can be seen to express a hope – to be found in several other films of the period – that one day a loved one thought lost in the war might return.

The film was a major box-office success and was likely seen by inclusive audiences in terms of age, gender and class: despite its “A” certificate it was deemed suitable for children and particularly adolescents; its focus on an all-male environment was countered by a ‘subtle feminine angle’ and it was predicted it would ‘captivate all

types of audiences'.⁸⁴ Its main appeal would appear to have been to the emotions with several critics from the popular press declaring that they had been deeply moved, even to tears, by the end of the film.⁸⁵ There was, however, among some critics of the quality press, a sense that an opportunity had been missed to produce a film to rival *La Grande Illusion*, although, as one of them noted, the events depicted were perhaps 'too recent, too close to us to bear frank analysis'.⁸⁶

There is little to suggest that the women to whom the men return in *Captive Heart* show any signs of having undergone major change during the period of separation. However, a change of character effected during a period of separation and the tensions this creates lies at the heart of *The Years Between* in which Diane Wentworth (Valerie Hobson), believing that her husband, Michael (Michael Redgrave), has been killed on active service, seeks to pick up her life by taking on his seat in Parliament and is on the verge of remarrying when she learns that he is alive and soon to be repatriated from a German prisoner-of-war camp.

This film also explores several issues relating to couples separated by war. On hearing that her husband has been killed, Diane is thrown into a deep depression and in one scene is seen "talking" to Michael, the darkness of the subject matter emphasised by an expressionist/*film noir*-type visual style. 'Nothing will ever be the same again' after the experience of the war is the constant refrain of the village postman and the challenge of life as an MP leaves Diane 'totally changed in character' much to the dismay of Michael who, on his return, finds any form of change unwelcome.⁸⁷ He is immediately upset by the absence of the front gates (recalling a comment made about a change of gate in *Captive Heart*) and is distressed by any change to the house, pointing out that he had spent his time in captivity imagining every detail of his home. He is particularly upset about the changes he notices in Diane, shocked to discover she is unwilling to give up her seat in Parliament and especially upset by the news that she

⁸⁴ *Kinematograph Weekly* 19 December 1946, *Kinematograph Weekly* 4 April 1946, *Monthly Film Bulletin* April 1946

⁸⁵ *News of the World* 31 March 1946; *Evening News* 29 March 1946; *Daily Sketch* 29 March 1946, *Sunday Express* 31 March 1946

⁸⁶ *Spectator* 12 April 1946, *Our Time* May 1946, *Reynolds News* 31 March 1946

⁸⁷ Manvell, p. 238.

was planning to remarry. In words that suggest widespread resentment on the part of returning servicemen, he comments bitterly: 'I'm not the first man who's had his wife stolen from him while he's away at the wars. It's quite a common thing they tell me!'

Other problems faced by couples are explored through the character of Diane's friend Alice, an independent woman – often seen wearing overalls and a headscarf as she mends cars in her fiancé's garage that she is running while he is fighting in Italy – whose friendships with a number of American servicemen raise suspicions of infidelity. Again recalling *Captive Heart*, Alice receives news from her fiancé that he has lost a leg and wants to break off their engagement because he considers that the man she became engaged to 'doesn't exist anymore'.

Tensions between Diana and Michael come to a head when Michael reveals that, as part of his cover, Diane had to be informed that he had died. Feeling betrayed, Diane looks set to leave Michael for good. However, it is the trusted servant, Nanny (Flora Robson), who, in a speech that would appear to call for couples throughout the nation to reconcile their differences, succeeds in reuniting the couple by pleading with them to seize their opportunity for happiness by working to understand each other:

There are thousands like me in this war as well as the last, women whose men won't come back to them. But there are thousands more like you, women whose men will come back to them. Men they didn't ever expect to see again. Men they didn't very much want to see again ... There are thousands of men who won't make allowances for what their wives have been through while they've been away. Men who'll expect to find nothing changed, even though they've changed themselves ... There's peace in the world again. It's starting today. But if you two are any sample of what's going to happen, then we might as well have the war again right away because we've lost the peace. Lost it before it's even started ...

The film ends with Diane and Michael together and this optimistic note is reinforced with the appearance of Alice and her fiancé celebrating V.E. Day together, suggesting that reconciliation has taken place between them as well.

Years Between enjoyed major box-office success, suggesting its popularity went beyond the middle-class audiences to which one paper felt it would appeal.⁸⁸ It would also appear to have been popular with women and girls: reviews referred to its appeal to 'women patrons' and its 'feminine touch'; a publicity taglines declared 'she found new love – and then he returned!', and, although awarded an "A" certificate, the film was deemed suitable for children.⁸⁹

Reviews of the film suggest that audiences were engaging specifically with the theme of disruption caused by wartime separation. The *Daily Mail* felt it dealt with 'the topical problem of the soldier returning from the war expecting to find everything the same', *Kinematograph Weekly* described it as a 'topical story', the *Times* stated that it dealt 'pretty honestly' with the issue of couples 'resuming their marriage as if there had been no years between', Roger Manvell felt the film highlighted 'the compromise a man and his wife have to effect if the years of their separation are not to stand between them' and the *Graphic* asserted that: 'It's probable as well as possible that married couples will go and see it who feel just as awkward about being reunited as Valerie Hobson and Michael Redgrave felt.'⁹⁰

Both films, in addition to the more general experiences of separation, feature characters who return unexpectedly with one of them returning, as it were, from the dead: a theme continued in *Piccadilly Incident* in which, following a whirlwind romance, Wren Diane (Anna Neagle) marries commando officer Alan (Michael Wilding) before she is posted to the Far East. When Diane's ship is sunk with all on board believed lost Alan remarries only to discover that Diane was one of a number of survivors. Although the theme of the unexpected return from war of a loved one thought killed is central to the film, a full exploration of the difficulties created by Diane's unexpected homecoming is sidestepped when she is killed in a bombing raid shortly after their reunion. However, the film touches on two issues relating to

⁸⁸ *Kinematograph Weekly* 19 December 1946, *Kinematograph Weekly* 11 April 1946

⁸⁹ BFI Library, *The Years Between* medium press-book (1946), *Kinematograph Weekly* 11 April 1946, *Today's Cinema* 5 April 1946

⁹⁰ *Daily Mail* 24 May 1946, *Kinematograph Weekly* 11 April 1946, *Times* 26 May 1946, BFI Library, Roger Manvell *British Film* (British Council Overseas Press Department) 4 June 1946, *Graphic* 26 May 1946

difficulties experienced by couples separated by war: fidelity and a bereaved partner moving on. While on a desert island, Diane had resisted the advances of a would-be suitor, rejecting his advice to live in the moment and not be 'stuck with a memory'. Applauding her faithfulness, one of Diane's fellow islanders makes a comment, seen from a female perspective, clearly hinting at constant pressure to abandon marital fidelity during the war: 'If the Allies had fought for democracy as hard as we have to fight for our honour, the war would have been over in a month.' Later, Alan's father justifies his son's decision to move on with his life, replying when Diana asks him whether Alan ever really loved her in words which would perhaps have struck a note with post-war audiences:

I can't answer that my dear. He loved you. When they told him you were dead, he seemed to die himself. Then, after a while, he found that life had to be lived, and people had to be loved. He loves her Diana, not in the way you were loved, perhaps, but in as true a way. You'd have wanted that for him, wouldn't you?

The film was an outstanding box-office success on its release, continued to make money the following year when it was rereleased, and also picked up a number of awards.⁹¹ It seems likely the full houses were made up largely of women and girls with the trade press describing it as 'appealing mainly to feminine patrons' and predicting that 'women will eat it' as well as deeming it suitable for children despite its "A" certificate.⁹² There was a feeling among some critics, from both quality and popular press, that the film was 'unconvincing', an unwelcome reversion to pre-war glamour and lacking in realism.⁹³ However, *Kinematograph Weekly* was clearly more in touch with cinema audiences when it suggested that the director knew the secret 'box-office recipe' and declared 'let the highbrows go hang!'⁹⁴

Together, these three films speak to anxieties about relationships surviving the war, but in general these fears are assuaged. The characters in these films often display their fears and doubts, but it is their qualities of level-headedness, loyalty,

⁹¹ *Kinematograph Weekly* 19 December 1946, *Kinematograph Weekly* 18 December 1947, Anna Neagle, *Anna Neagle Says "There's Always Tomorrow"* (London: WH Allen, 1974), p. 155.

⁹² *Kinematograph Weekly* 29 August 1946, *Today's Cinema* 27 August 1946

⁹³ *Guardian* 24 August 1946, *People* 25 August 1946

⁹⁴ *Kinematograph Weekly* 29 August 1946

commitment and sense of duty, rather than notions of romantic love, that ensure the survival of their relationships. As such, although some of the audience's darkest fears are explored, these films have a reassuring quality to them that appear to be rooted in a belief in the British people's ability to survive not only the war but also its aftermath.

1.2 Strained Relationships Revisited – *The Small Voice*, *The Small Back Room* and *The Woman with No Name*

Audiences might have been reassured by films in which women welcome back their injured men, grateful that they are alive. However, an episode recorded by the diarist Nella Last, in which a young woman of her acquaintance takes her own life following the suicide of her fiancé who had suffered serious injuries during the war, suggests that such sentiments might well have been naive:

Monday 24 December, Christmas Eve. Mrs Wittam was very upset. Her best friend's daughter had been cut to pieces on the railway line and she was going to her funeral. Such a bright clever girl who worked in our Public Library and whose fiancé shot himself a few weeks ago. He was in the RAF and badly injured but they 'repaired' his poor face and his other injuries mended, but later he found himself going blind.⁹⁵

Three films released between 1948 and 1951 – *The Small Voice* (1948), *The Small Back Room* and *The Woman with No Name* (1951) – revisit the theme of relationships strained by the experience of the war. In each film, physical injury, either suffered during the war or else given a wartime context, creates a sense of emasculation that threatens to destroy the relationship and each film ends happily with the couples having resolved their difficulties.

In *Small Voice* a married couple is on the verge of separation because, according to Eleanor (Valerie Hobson), the sense of bitterness displayed by her husband, Murray (James Donald), after suffering a serious leg injury during the war has made him impossible to live with. Stopping to assist the victims of a car accident they find

⁹⁵ Patricia and Robert Malcolmson (editors), *The Diaries of Nella Last: Writing in War and Peace* (London: Profile Books, 2012), p. 257.

themselves, along with two children, held hostage at gunpoint by three fugitives. This period of captivity reinforces Murray's sense of emasculation but the film ends with his being regarded as a hero after he shoots the gang leader and Murray and Eleanor agreeing they will face the future together.

The nature of Murray's injury and the sense of bitterness and emasculation it causes him are established at the beginning of the film when he is reminded insensitively by a former school colleague that despite his pre-war potential as a county cricketer all he can now look forward to is the occasional game of village cricket. Low-angle shots reveal the difficulty Murray experiences when walking and his sense of insecurity is revealed by the way he suspects his wife of infidelity. In a scene in which the optimism of *Captive Heart* and *Years Between* is countered, Eleanor recalls that when Murray returned from the war she was so happy to have him back that she would not have minded if he had lost both legs, but now feels she has to leave before his 'obsession' with his injury destroys not only their marriage but their friendship too.

Murray's sense of emasculation is further revealed when he and Eleanor are held captive at gunpoint as his injury prevents him from attempting either to escape or to disarm the gang. In addition, he clearly feels threatened by the masculinity and athleticism of the gang leader Boke (Harold Keel), Murray's sense of inadequacy compounded when Boke – whose physical attraction is not entirely lost on Eleanor even though she considers him morally detestable – describes Eleanor as having 'all the guts in the family'.

However, Murray is presented with an opportunity to regain his masculinity, as it were, by killing Boke in order to prevent him shooting one of the children. Although it is clear that Boke had engineered the circumstances of his own death because he could not face being returned to jail, Murray is applauded by the police as a hero, an act of heroism that restores Murray in the eyes of Eleanor who, although it was she who had obtained the gun, felt unable to use it herself and the film ends on an optimistic note with the couple contemplating a life together.

In *Small Back Room* a similar sense of emasculation afflicts Sammy Rice (David Farrar) a highly-talented government scientist whose feelings of bitterness at the loss of his lower leg – the cause of which is never fully explained – contributes to his compulsive drinking and places a considerable strain on his relationship with girlfriend Susan (Kathleen Byron), a fellow worker at a government institute involved in the testing of new weapons. However, Sammy's success in disarming a lethal new German weapon, which had claimed the life of several civilians and forces personnel, re-establishes his self-confidence and the film ends with Sammy and Susan embracing in a text-book happy ending.

Sammy's sense of emasculation is shown in several ways. On two occasions, he is placed next to able-bodied men in forces uniform: a dashing young officer who dances with Susan while Sammy is left with the man's girlfriend talking endlessly about her partner's dancing skills and Susan's brother who accompanies Sammy to his local pub where, in the crowd, Sammy seems trapped by his lack of mobility. Additionally, there are several occasions when Sammy is seen resting his head on the shoulder of Susan, a shot used in some of the publicity material, that suggests a reversal in the accepted male-female roles of the time.⁹⁶ Indeed, it has been argued that this framing was frequently used in German cinema following the First World War to signify impotence.⁹⁷ Furthermore, in a scene set on London's embankment it is strongly hinted that Sammy, perhaps fearful of physical intimacy with Susan, has gone there in search of prostitutes.

One other character mirrors Sammy's sense of incompleteness, his colleague Corporal Taylor (Cyril Cusack) a talented scientist who has a disability in the form of a stutter, something that audiences might well have associated with war neurosis. Like Sammy, Taylor is experiencing trouble in his relationship, it being implied that his wife is seeing other men. In this way the film again hints at a link between physical disability and sexual inadequacy.

⁹⁶ BFI Library, *The Small Back Room* medium press-book (1949)

⁹⁷ Kracauer, p. 99.

The general tone of much of the film is dark with an accompanying visual style with small, dark sets that emphasise Sammy's sense of claustrophobia and the employment of expressionist visual techniques in a scene, lit with what the director referred to as 'Caligari lighting', in which Sammy battles a giant whisky bottle.⁹⁸ There is also an air of cynicism about the film, very much at odds with films made during the war and the early 1950s, captured in particular in the character of RB Waring (Jack Hawkins), Sammy's manipulative boss who is willing to put the lives of British troops at risk by recommending the adoption of an untested weapon because he believes this will increase his prospects of promotion. However, the discovery of two unexploded bombs presents Sammy with the opportunity to regain his self-confidence and restore himself in the eyes of others by diffusing the second of the two bombs discovered on a beach, the first having claimed the life of an army bomb disposal expert, and the film ends with an almost ironic happy ending featuring the close-up smiling faces of Sammy and Susan.

The theme of emasculation is also explored in *Woman with No Name* in which, it is subsequently revealed, a serious injury sustained by Lake (Edward Underdown) that resulted in his being confined temporarily to a wheelchair had led to the breakdown of his marriage to Yvonne (Phyllis Calvert). Fleeing Lake's heavy drinking and violent outbursts Yvonne is injured in a bombing raid that leaves her with no knowledge of her identity or memory of her past other than two recurring nightmares: one in which she is being chased by a sinister figure who walks with the aid of a stick, the other in which ghostly horses are jumping over a fence.

Lake's injury was, it is learned, sustained before the war but his sense of emasculation resulting from his disability is given a wartime context. It is revealed that he was turned down for active service and that this, as his doctor notes, caused him considerable distress: 'A man can feel pretty cut up when he's told he's of no use to his country in wartime.' Lake himself comments bitterly on the irony of able-bodied men

⁹⁸ Michael Powell, *Million Dollar Movie: The Second Volume of his Life in Movies* (London: Heinemann, 1992), p. 12.

being killed in battle when he is unable to assist the war effort – ‘Men who have everything to live for are being killed every day’ – and in one scene he is seen as a lonely and isolated figure staring up, with a sense of regret, as bomber aircraft fly overhead. It is also revealed that Lake’s behaviour had driven Yvonne to seek the company of other men, something which had increased his sense of emasculation. However, an optimistic note is struck as Yvonne gradually recalls her part in causing the horse-riding accident in which Lake was injured and the film ends with Yvonne and Lake determined to resolve their differences.

The film is particularly interesting in its use of inventive visual techniques to present Yvonne’s nightmares: being chased by a huge shadow figure in what appears to be a dark and distorted house. The sinister figure is described as a ‘grotesque shadow of a limping man’ and the set and lighting as ‘distorted and surrealistic’ in the script, although the term expressionist/*film noir* would not be out of place.⁹⁹ Yvonne’s nightmares are accompanied by a deep sense of anxiety and despair, shown by her clutching her head on several occasions and her sense of lost identity is shown by frequent shots of her looking at herself in a variety of mirrors.

None of these films achieved major box-office success.¹⁰⁰ *Small Back Room*’s director Michael Powell would later ascribe his film’s commercial failure to a lack of enthusiasm for reliving the war years – ‘war films were out – O-U-T’ – a comment that echoes TEB Clarke’s view that *Against the Wind* failed at the box-office the previous year because it was ahead of its time.¹⁰¹ However, reviews of the three films suggest an alternative explanation: audiences might have felt uncomfortable with and unsympathetic towards emasculated men presented as key protagonists. *Woman with No Name*’s Lake was described as ‘embittered’ and there was an absence of sympathy for *Small Voice*’s Murray with several critics describing him as ‘neurotic’, one referring to his ‘morbid sensitivity about his wooden leg’ and others accusing him of being ‘full of self-

⁹⁹ BFI Library (S.10638) *The Woman with No Name* shooting script (11/49)

¹⁰⁰ *Kinematograph Weekly* 16 December 1948, *Kinematograph Weekly* 15 December 1949, *Kinematograph Weekly* 20 December 1951

¹⁰¹ Powell, p. 11. TEB Clarke, *This is Where I came In* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994), p. 157.

pity and bitterness' and 'a little too sorry for himself'.¹⁰² Likewise, *Small Back Room's* Sammy was termed 'a self-pitying neurotic', 'morbid with self-pity', 'a neurotic with an inferiority complex' and a 'bad-tempered neurotic'.¹⁰³

There was condemnation, largely from the quality press, of *The Small Back Room's* expressionist-influenced "whisky bottle sequence", variously described as an 'impressionist nightmare', a 'nightmarish extravaganza', a 'hideous arty-crafty, pseudo-impressionistic' sequence and 'pretentious impressionistic montagery'.¹⁰⁴ Interestingly, Dilys Powell's assertion that 'the Teutonic Expressionism of the hero's vigil with a whisky bottle' was one of the few low points of the film echoes the unease felt by Arthur Vessello and Caroline Lejeune concerning the influence of German Expressionist cinema seen in the wake of *They Made Me a Fugitive* (1947).¹⁰⁵

1.3 Grasping the Peace – *Frieda*, *Portrait from Life* and *The Lost People*

Three films released between 1947 and 1949 explore not only the lasting effects of war on individuals and families but also question whether the peoples of Europe will be able to live together in peace following the cessation of hostilities. The first of these, *Frieda*, asks whether all Germans are to blame for the rise of National Socialism, the outbreak of war and the atrocities committed during it. The other two, *Portrait from Life* (1948) and *The Lost People* (1949), are concerned with the effects of the war on those who have been forced to leave their homes and have become separated from their families. All three appear to carry a warning that a state of lasting peace cannot be taken for granted.

¹⁰² *Sunday Dispatch* 21 January 1951, *Star* 12 November 1948, *Daily Worker* 13 November 1948, *Daily Telegraph* 15 November 1948, *Kinematograph Weekly* 11 November 1948

¹⁰³ *Daily Telegraph* 24 January 1949, *Star* 21 January 1949, *News of the World* 23 January 1949, *Daily Mail* 21 January 1949

¹⁰⁴ *Spectator* 28 January 1949, *Daily Telegraph* 24 January 1949, *Sunday Chronicle* 23 January 1949, *Graphic* 21 January 1949

¹⁰⁵ *Daily Telegraph* 24 January 1949

Frieda follows the fortunes of Robert Dawson (David Farrar), a former RAF pilot and escaped prisoner-of-war who marries and brings back to England the German nurse who helped him to escape, Frieda Mannsfeld (Mai Zetterling). The film considers whether the British people can put the war behind them asking whether, and under what circumstances, the German people, in the person of Frieda, can be accepted back into the family of nations: a question directed at cinema audiences by asking whether they could let Frieda into their homes.¹⁰⁶ The case against forgiving-and-forgetting is made by Robert's aunt Nell (Flora Robson) who represents Vansittartism, the view that the Germans are an inherently warlike people who will, if allowed, start another war in the future. Nell's views are given support by the appearance of Frieda's brother Ricky, an unrepentant Nazi.

For most characters, the question of putting the war behind them is a personal one with many still carrying, sometimes literally, the scars of war: scars which are suggested visually in a number of ways. Jim, a young man from the village has a disfiguring scar on one side of his face following a beating from a concentration camp guard and his "good-side" is generally presented to the camera, suggesting his sense of unease with his physical appearance. Frieda, whose decision to help Robert escape clearly indicates a rejection of Nazi ideology, is shocked by newsreel footage from the Belsen concentration camp and her horror, confusion and guilt is captured in an expressionist-influenced scene in which she is framed so that a giant female figure on a film poster towers over her threateningly. Judy, Robert's sister-in-law, is grieving for the loss of her husband, Alan, and Robert's physical similarity to his late brother causes her to "see" her husband whenever she sees her brother-in-law. Although physically unharmed, Robert finds it difficult to adjust to life after the war. Something of an enigmatic character, Robert has been seen as cruel to Frieda, although the film's script indicates that he too has been deeply affected by his experiences: 'Robert's attitude to his home, his family, is reserved, strained – sometimes tender, sometimes defensively

¹⁰⁶ Charlotte Brunsdon and Rachel Moseley, 'She's a Foreigner Who's Become a British Subject', in Alan Burton, Tim O'Sullivan and Paul Wells (editors), *Liberal Directions: Basil Dearden and Post-war British Film Culture* (Trowbridge, Flick Books, 1997), pp. 129-36., p. 130., BFI Library, *Frieda* medium press-book (1947)

cynical, as if, after five years in a German prison camp, he finds himself ill at ease in once familiar surroundings.¹⁰⁷

The film, despite its thematic and sometimes visual darkness, ends on an optimistic note. Nell finally welcomes Frieda into the family – concluding, in words that sum up the film's central message that 'You can't be human if you treat others as less than human' – and, in a change to the original screenplay, Robert and Frieda are happily reunited.¹⁰⁸ Of particular significance is Judy's declaration, echoing the words of Alan's father in *Piccadilly Incident*, that she has owes it to her late husband to get on with her life:

At first nothing mattered – with Alan ... I seemed to be betraying him by going on living without him – in being alive while he was dead ... It's not true. I'm only one of hundreds of thousands of women who've lost their men and I've no more right to think that than anyone else. We can't live forever in the shadow of war ... Alan died to give me a future and if I don't use it – then I'll be betraying him ...

Interesting evidence of people's sensitivity to on-screen depictions of their, and their loved ones', part in the war can be seen in the hostile reaction from former members of a Polish regiment – the Polish 2nd Corps – to the scene in which Frieda's brother first appears, wearing their uniform. A Mrs Violet Wloch, the wife of a Polish ex-serviceman, wrote to Michael Balcon complaining that her husband and other members of his former regiment felt 'grossly insulted' by any association with such an 'exceedingly distasteful character' and were outraged to see the uniform that they had proudly worn in battle in Italy and in North Africa worn by 'a Nazi scoundrel & S.S. guard of a concentration camp.'¹⁰⁹ In addition, another letter was received from the Polish Combatants Association (Branch No 391), complaining of the misuse of the uniform and the cherished badge of the regiment.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios* (London: Cameron & Tayleur, 1977), p. 75.; Julian Petley, 'The Lost Continent' in Charles Barr (editor) *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1986), pp. 98-119, p. 111.; BFI Library, S.89 *Frieda* final shooting script (17/8/46)

¹⁰⁸ S.89

¹⁰⁹ BFI Library, Michael Balcon Collection G/68 letter to Balcon (31/8/47)

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, letter to Balcon (10/8/47)

Although the trade press suggested that the film would appeal specifically to a 'discerning patronage' and to the 'feminine mind', its major commercial success, along with its being deemed suitable for children and particularly adolescents despite an "A" certificate, would suggest a more inclusive audience.¹¹¹ Publicity material shows a clear attempt to engage potential film-goers in a debate about whether the German people were all to blame for their country's crimes – advertisements used the tagline 'Would you take Frieda into your home?' – and there is evidence from reviews that suggests that audiences were happy to take part in this topical debate.¹¹² One critic described the film as 'a timely picture which will cause many heated discussions' and there was much agreement among quality, popular and trade press that the film was indeed dealing both with a current concern – 'attempt[s] to deal seriously with a modern problem', 'a serious attempt to face a contemporary problem' – that would stimulate debate after the end of the film: 'a picture you can argue about', 'a film with a theme that will set any audience thinking', 'a well-made film that will make most people argue.'¹¹³

Over the next two years, two films from Gainsborough studios appeared featuring the plight of displaced persons at the end of the Second World War. Although, in keeping with the studio's output, both films could be classed as romantic melodramas, they are particularly significant as explorations – largely or entirely set outside of Britain – of the struggles of the peoples of mainland Europe to rebuild their lives while beset by fear and suspicion.

In *Portrait from Life* an army officer, Major Lawrence (Guy Rolfe), promises an elderly Jewish refugee that he will help him track down the girl in a portrait – 'very beautiful' but looking 'thin and delicate' – who the old man swears is his daughter who he has not seen since he was forced to leave Austria before the war.¹¹⁴ Lawrence's promise takes him to a number of camps for displaced persons before he finds the girl (Mai

¹¹¹ *Today's Cinema* 20 June 1947, *Kinematograph Weekly* 26 June 1947, *Kinematograph Weekly* 18 December 1947, *Monthly Film Bulletin* January 1947

¹¹² *Kinematograph Weekly* 12 June 1947

¹¹³ *Daily Mirror* 4 July 1947, *Manchester Guardian* 5 July 1947, *Evening Standard* 4 July 1947, *Evening News* 3 July 1947, *Monthly Film Bulletin* July 1947, *Daily Express* 4 July 1947

¹¹⁴ BFI Library S.14901 *Portrait from Life* final script (22/1/48)

Zetterling), variously referred to as Lidia and Hildegard, living with a man she believes to be her father but who turns out to be a fugitive Nazi war criminal.

The film features two characters that have been traumatised by their experiences of the war. Lidia/Hildegard has suffered a breakdown and is unable, until the end of the film, to recall any of the events and experiences that caused it: witnessing her mother being shot for resisting transfer to Auschwitz and her experiences of life in the camps. The artist who painted the portrait, Campbell Reid (Robert Beatty), although seen as caring and compassionate during the flashback sequences, has by the end of the war become a wreck of a man who has turned to alcohol because the sights he has witnessed have caused him to lose faith in humanity, declaring: 'The world's in a mess – a ruddy awful, stinking mess, nobody knows where they're going – or why – and nobody cares.'

There is also a clear assertion that the ending of hostilities has not ended the suffering of the displaced people of Europe. Lawrence gives as his reasons for helping the girl's father that he has recently seen these camps in Germany and that 'they're not a pretty sight', while Reid had informed Lidia/Hildegard that she had 'a decent future' ahead of her if only she could 'get out of this stinking camp and get back among decent people'. Furthermore, a grim picture of life in the camps for a young girl is provided by Hendleman, the "father" of Lidia/Hildegard, who tells Lawrence: 'I think you do not understand, my friend. Here in the camp it is not like a civilised country. There are men who are little better than the beasts of the jungle. They do not think of a pretty young girl as something to be respected. They have other ideas.'

Perhaps surprisingly for Gainsborough the film-makers were clearly intent on producing 'a documentary survey of the problem of the displaced persons' with scenes showing the efforts of Lawrence to trace the girl presented 'almost montage style, with short scenes dissolving one into another' and, although logistical problems prevented overseas filming, members of the production team had visited a number of actual camps, photographs of which were used to guide the reconstruction of a camp

built near Southampton for exterior filming.¹¹⁵ In addition, publicity material focussed on what producers considered the topical and urgent nature of the film's subject matter:

Although the setting for *Portrait from Life* is mainly European, its theme is world-wide. Amid the pathetic plight of the multitude of Displaced Persons in Europe, Davis Evans has introduced a touching human drama, the theme of which is not only topical but, because of the immense difficulties in resettlement of these unfortunate war victims, must remain tragically urgent for some time.¹¹⁶

The scenes in the camp are thematically and visually dark. The inmates are presented as concerned only with their own survival, suspicious of others and living in fear of the more powerful inmates and several scenes employ *chiaroscuro* lighting to reinforce the sense of threat and danger. However, the film is leavened by elements of romance with the girl developing crushes on both Reid and Lawrence and – in a change to the original script – the film ends happily with a hint of future romance.¹¹⁷

The Lost People – in which a British officer, Captain Ridley (Dennis Price), and his sergeant, Barnes (William Hartnell), are responsible for a group of displaced persons temporarily housed in a disused theatre used as a 'Dispersal Centre' – carries a stark warning of the dangers of repeating the mistakes of the past if the peoples of Europe fail to learn the lessons of war.¹¹⁸ The theatre, with its spaces divided between squabbling national groups, is clearly a metaphor for a continent divided by years of war and Ridley and Barnes represent contrasting viewpoints regarding the newly-won peace in Europe and, indeed, about human nature in general. Ridley is an idealist who believes that the victorious nations can now work together harmoniously and at one point admonishes men who have been fighting with the words, 'I'm not going to believe that you're going on for ever like this. I am not going to believe that there is no solution.' However, Ridley's idealism and optimism is seen as a sign of weakness by many of the displaced persons, with one of them commenting: 'You don't have to worry about him. He has one great weakness; he is trying to be fair to everyone. You

¹¹⁵ BFI Library, Terence Fisher Collection *Portrait from Life* exploitation folder

¹¹⁶ Ibid

¹¹⁷ S.14901

¹¹⁸ BFI Library S.14364 *The Lost People* post-production script (22/9/49)

cannot be fair to everyone and still remain strong.' On the other hand, Barnes is a realist to whom the persistent antagonism between the various groups comes as no surprise. However, his realism is tinged with cynicism as seen when he wrongly assumes that Ridley's act of kindness towards a young woman, Lily (Mai Zetterling), was a payment for sexual favours.

The dehumanising effects of war can be seen in the way that those who have survived it are shown to be hard-bitten and cunning and this is most apparent in the way that Lily, who has lived in concentration camps since the age of twelve, displays a cynicism at odds with her youth. At one point, she explains why she steals: 'In the world today, my friend, there are two sorts of people; those who steal and those who are stolen from. I would rather be the one who steals, it is more comfortable.' When she is warned by Barnes about some of the men in the centre who he describes as 'wolves', she indicates her familiarity with such men, replying that she can 'spot them by the length of their teeth'. Furthermore, she is initially uneasy about the attention towards her of Jan (Richard Attenborough) – either suspecting sexual advances or simply fearful of forming any attachment – telling him that in the camps people soon learn to keep themselves to themselves.

However, the film appears to strike a note of optimism that suggests that something positive has survived the war when Lily reveals to Jan that throughout her time in the camps she dreamed of a better life: 'All the time in the camps I thought, one day this thing will be over and we shall live real life again. One day I shall have a home and a man and I shall be married, and when I marry I want to be like other brides.' Furthermore, their romance and subsequent wedding on the stage of the theatre seem to confirm this promise of a better life to come. Soon afterwards, however, Lily is stabbed to death when she is mistaken for another prisoner believed to be a collaborator. As Lily's lifeless body is brought onto the stage and everyone in the theatre falls silent, it falls to Ridley to deliver a speech which sets out clearly the consequences of failing to work together for peace:

Two hours ago ... Lily Prater was married on this stage. Now she lies here dead, and I'll tell you why she died. It was because your prejudices and fears ... are greater than your common sense. A couple

of hours ago ... when you were all frightened of the same thing, and not of each other, you worked together like friends and neighbours. There was peace on earth. You made that peace. That was only an hour ago ... and already you have forgotten that lesson, and Lily Prater is dead. Because when you fight it is the little people who get hurt ... the people who only want to live in peace.

Ridley's words would appear to speak beyond his immediate audience to the British people no longer united against a common enemy, competing for limited resources and to the people of Europe, split into two competing camps, each with the power to inflict terrible casualties on each other.

Neither of the films appears to have made an impact at the box-office, and mediocre reviews in the trade press, along with the suggestion that the theme of displaced persons was by now no longer topical, might account for the films' lack of success.¹¹⁹ However, it is also quite possible that the subject of the displaced people of continental Europe was not one that held any great interest for British cinema audiences. None-the-less, these films remain significant as examples of British cinema's engagement with this issue.

1.4 Romance – *The Hasty Heart*, *Landfall* and *Lilli Marlene*

Although nearly all the films which feature the Second World War released between the end of hostilities and 1951 contain a significant element of romance, in *The Hasty Heart* (1949), *Landfall* (1949) and *Lilli Marlene* (1951) romance, of one sort or another, takes centre stage. Set shortly after the end of the war in a military hospital in Burma *Hasty Heart* concerns a young Scottish corporal, Lachie (Richard Todd), who has been wounded in battle and, unaware that he has only days to live, mistakes the kindness of Sister Parker (Patricia Neal) for a declaration of love and the comradeship of his fellow

¹¹⁹ *Kinematograph Weekly* 16 December 1948, *Kinematograph Weekly* 15 December 1949, *Today's Cinema* 17 December 1948, *Kinematograph Weekly* 25 August 1949, *Monthly Film Bulletin* August 1949

patients for genuine friendship. When he learns the full extent of his injuries, he feels betrayed and humiliated, but later feels grateful for the kindness he has been shown and thankful that he has been surrounded by friends during his final days.

The opening titles of *Landfall* leave audiences in no doubt that for the next ninety minutes the emphasis will be on romance: 'Wars come, and all the world is shattered by their blast. But through it all young people meet, fall in love and marry.' A young couple, Rick (Michael Denison) and Mona (Patricia Plunkett), does indeed meet and fall in love amidst the uncertainty and chaos of the war but events conspire to separate them when Rick, a pilot in Coastal Command, appears to have sunk a Royal Navy submarine in error. Breaking off his relationship with Mona, he volunteers for the hazardous work of a test pilot, an act that recalls tales of redemption such as *The Four Feathers* (1939) and *Ships with Wings* (1941). However, Mona, always sure of Rick's innocence, finds the proof they need and the film ends with Rick reinstated and the couple married.

Lilli Marlene is a reimagining of the origins of the famous song, set against the backdrop of the North Africa campaign, in which the eponymous heroine (Lisa Daniely), a young French-German girl living in Benghazi, is not only the inspiration for the song, but also a gifted singer whom the Germans want to use for propaganda purposes. An American journalist Steve (Hugh McDermott) and Lilli fall in love and, despite the reappearance of Steve's ex-wife and the capture and brainwashing of Lilli by the Germans, their love endures and they are reunited in post-war Britain.

Both *Hasty Heart* and *Lilli Marlene* were major box-office successes, while *Landfall* was possibly shown as a supporting feature.¹²⁰ The trade press noted *Hasty Heart's* 'compelling feminine angle', its trailer was described as emphasising the film's appeal to women and several reviews suggest its main appeal was to the emotions: 'I was genuinely moved to tears', 'a smash and grab raid on your heartstrings', 'there isn't a

¹²⁰ *Kinematograph Weekly* 15 December 1949, *Kinematograph Weekly* 20 December 1951

woman who won't weep her eyes out'.¹²¹ *Lilli Marlene* was likely seen by general family audiences attracted by the humour and music.¹²² The success of these films suggests that films in which the war featured as a backdrop to tales of romance – with or without a happy ending – could appeal to certain audiences.

Conclusion

The romances apart, a sense of unease and anxiety pervades the films considered in this chapter: fears that the years of separation might have created an unbridgeable gap between couples; fears that physical injury might have left men emasculated; fears that the seeds of the next conflict are being sown in distrust and animosity between nations. Often, this sense of anxiety is accompanied by a dark visual style. However, it is significant that most films end on something of a positive note.

The earlier films which explore the disruption to couple's lives proved popular with audiences, as did the one film that looked at the prospects of peace in Europe from a British perspective and there is evidence of audience engaging specifically with these issues from reviews of *The Years Between* and *Frieda*. It is also clear that audiences showed little appetite for films that featured men embittered by injury or the plight of the peoples of mainland Europe.

¹²¹ *Kinematograph Weekly* 15 September 1949, *Evening Standard* 15 September 1949, *Daily Worker* 17 September 1949, *Sunday Express* 18 September 1949, *News Chronicle* 17 September 1949, *Sunday Pictorial* 18 September 1949

¹²² *Kinematograph Weekly* 9 November 1950

Chapter Two - Thrillers

2.1 Tales of Returning Servicemen – *They Made Me a Fugitive*, *Dancing with Crime*, *The Flamingo Affair*, *Noose* and *Night Beat*

On 8th December 1945 Herbert Brush, a seventy-two-year-old retired engineer from south London recorded in his diary his thoughts about the role of men recently returned from service with the armed forces were playing in the crime wave widely thought to be engulfing the capital:

I expect that all these robberies that are taking place in London now are carried out by young men who are so used to excitement that they can't do without it now that the war is over. After a few years with a gun in one's hand it is not likely that a hungry man would hesitate for long if he knew where to find plenty of money.¹²³

Despite difficulties in comparing pre-war and post-war crime rates, including an increase in the number of activities designated as crimes, the post-war years show evidence of both an increase in crime and, crucially, a widespread perception of an increase in lawlessness. One historian has described Britain in 1945 as a country 'awash with guns, illegally sold by American servicemen for £25 for a handgun, or brought back by British servicemen from abroad', while another has noted that October 1945 – a month in which one diarist complained of a 'vast crime wave in Britain today' – was the busiest month 'that Scotland Yard had ever known', and 1948 – a year in which another diarist declared that 'a vast crime wave is sweeping Britain' – the number of indictable offences was almost double that of 1937.¹²⁴

Anxieties about the part played in this crime wave by returning Servicemen are explored in five films released between 1947 and 1948 that paint a bleak, even menacing, picture of a thriving criminal underworld where the sort of community

¹²³ Simon Garfield, *Our Hidden Lives: The Remarkable Diaries of Post-War Britain* (London: Ebury Press, 2004), p. 143.

¹²⁴ Maureen Waller, *London 1945* (London: John Murray, 2004), p. 243. Kynaston, p. 112., p. 268.

cohesion presented in films made during the war has clearly broken down. They begin with a picture of society in disequilibrium and what they have in common as well as their theme and visual style is the way that some form of equilibrium is re-established in a way that might well offer reassurance to Mr Brush and others who shared his fears.

They Made Me a Fugitive features a former RAF pilot, Clem Morgan (Trevor Howard), who joins a criminal gang run by Narcy (Griffiths Jones) because he misses the excitement of active service. However, Clem refuses to become involved in cocaine dealing and finds himself framed for the death of a policeman killed during a botched robbery. With the help of Narcy's former girlfriend, Sally, Clem breaks out of prison and seeks to clear his name.

The film certainly presents a bleak picture of post-war Britain, one in which 'an alternative society with alternative values' exists living 'below the surface of the respectable world' like a 'pool of piranhas': black-marketers use coffins to transport cocaine; women are savagely beaten; gang members who have outlived their usefulness are disposed of and firearms are readily available.¹²⁵ Indeed, there is an assertion that the codes of honour that bound pre-war criminals have been abandoned with Narcy being described as 'cheap, rotten, after-the-war trash'.

However, despite its bleak portrayal of post-war British society, there is much to assuage the fears of people such as Herbert Brush. Although several critics at the time objected to the use of the word 'hero' to describe him, it seems fair to conclude, along with one writer, that by the end of the film Clem Morgan has developed into 'a satisfactory hero'.¹²⁶ Indeed, to use Durnat's terminology, he is both 'cad' and 'cadet': someone who operates outside of the law but is never-the-less essentially decent.¹²⁷ Clem might be tempted by the excitement of criminal raids and the thrill of carrying black-market goods, but there are lines he will not cross. He refuses to trade in drugs

¹²⁵ Richards, *Film and British National Identity*, p. 145.

¹²⁶ *Sunday Chronicle* 29 June 1947, *Sunday Graphic* 29 June 1947, *Daily Worker* 28 June 1947, Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, p. 189.

¹²⁷ Durnat, p. 145.

and, during a raid, tries to prevent the getaway car from mowing down a policeman. It is revealed too that the driver of a lorry that he steals later in the film was bound and gagged, but otherwise unharmed. Arguably, the most significant evidence that Clem retains a sense of decency comes when he is offered help to evade the police from a woman who wants him to kill her drunken, but seemingly not abusive, husband. Her assumption that men who have killed in time of war will find it easier to kill in time of peace is contradicted by Clem who declares that there is a huge difference between killing a 'fanatical Nazi' in wartime and killing an innocent man in peacetime.

The film ends on a note which, in keeping with the general mood of the film, is positive, but falls short of the text-book happy ending. The BBFC scenario reports reveal that the original screenplay had Narcy confessing his guilt shortly before he dies leaving Morgan a free man almost certainly about to marry Sally.¹²⁸ However, the film ends with Narcy taking his secret to his grave and Clem returning to jail to complete his sentence, although it is hinted that evidence may come to light to refute his guilt and that Sally will be waiting for him when he comes out.

Released the following year, *The Flamingo Affair* (1948) follows a similar narrative trajectory to that of *Fugitive*. Dick Tarleton (Dennis Webb), a disgruntled former commando officer who finds himself back in his pre-war job as a garage mechanic, is easy prey for the glamorous Paula Danvers (Colette Melville) who wants to recruit him as hired muscle in her black-market empire. The cause of Dick's disgruntlement, the loss of the purpose and status he enjoyed as a captain in the commandos, is revealed in two conversations: to the barman at the Flamingo night-club he complains that after 'six wasted years' in which he learned nothing but jiu-jitsu he is back in his old job and no longer Captain Tarleton but just 'plain Dick' and to his boss at the garage who advises him to look to the future and forget about the past he replies bitterly that it is 'remarkable how easily some folk forget.'

¹²⁸ BFI Library, Scenario Reports 41/41a, "A Convict Has Escaped" (They Made Me a Fugitive)

A similarly bleak picture of post-war Britain is painted: black-market activity is commonplace; violence or the threat of violence is ever-present; fire-arms are widely available and the seemingly respectable patrons of the Flamingo nightclub are, Paula reveals, making their money through crime. A disagreement at the club becomes a no-holds-barred fight, Dick carries a gun which he casually displays in the nightclub and the garage owner keeps a gun in his office for fear of robbery. In addition, the film exhibits examples of *film noir* iconography including, in the character of Paula, a classic example of a *femme fatale*. Post-war British crime films have been said to include expressions of 'men's contradictory experience of power' and for much of the film Paula has the upper-hand over Dick.¹²⁹ She is linked symbolically to a spider – possibly the Black Widow that devours its partner – by a model spider positioned in the middle of a web displayed above the bar in the Flamingo nightclub and she manipulates him by both flattering him with regard to his manliness and taunting him over his loss of wartime status, telling him: 'You told me you were once responsible for the lives of hundreds of men. What are you responsible for now? You don't owe anyone a thing the way they've kicked you around.' However, Dick too turns his back on crime, using his martial skills to protect and not rob the garage where he works and his break with Paula is marked symbolically at the end of the film when the model of the spider's web starts to unravel.

A different take on the tale of the returning serviceman can be seen in *Dancing with Crime* (1947) in which Ted Peters (Richard Attenborough), a former sergeant who had won the Military Cross, not only turns his back on offers of lucrative black market work but also uses, along with a talent for detective work, his martial skills to bring to justice the criminal gang that murdered his best friend. Although the settings are similar to *Fugitive* and *Flamingo*, the film has, on account of Ted's rejection of crime, a more wholesome feel to it and, owing to the amateur sleuthing of Ted and his girlfriend Joy (Sheila Sim), a lighter tone, something that might explain why, despite declaring this a

¹²⁹ Andrew Clay, 'Men, Women and Money: Masculinity in Crisis in the British Professional Crime Film 1946-1965' in Steve Chibnall and Robert Murphy (editors) *British Crime Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 51-65., p. 51.

'gangster story of murder, blackmail and thieving', the censors had no objection to the 'dialogue or action' as long as the fight scenes were not 'brutal'.¹³⁰

However, in parts the film still paints a grim picture of post-war society: black-market activity is rife, guns are widely available and criminal gangs are ruthless. Furthermore, there are a number of indications of the ease with which people can cross the line between respectability and criminal behaviour as can be seen from a discussion between Ted, Joy and a police inspector:

Inspector: Civvy Street seems pretty strange to some of the boys.

Joy: Yes, when they come out they don't know what to do.

Ted: Well, sir, it isn't only that. But the job he did before the war seems sort of small after six years.

Joy: Besides, it costs so much more to live now.

Of particular interest is the gang boss Gregory (Barry Jones) whose lack of any of the obvious markers of the gangster implies a blurring of the distinctions between respectability and criminality. Described by one writer as 'outwardly ultra-respectable', this smartly-dressed and quietly-spoken character appears a pillar of the community and is at one point he is mistaken by Ted for a police inspector.¹³¹

Unlike the protagonists of *Fugitive* and *Flamingo*, Ted Peters is very much the conventional hero from the start of the film and remains so until the end. This decorated hero wears his army tunic as his taxi driver "uniform" and, although it has been suggested that this is an indication of post-war poverty, the prominent display of his medal ribbons also suggests a pride in his wartime service.¹³² His rejection of the black market indicates a determination to make an honest living and he displays courage and skill in his fight to bring the criminals to justice.

Like *Dancing with Crime, Noose* (1948) features a returning serviceman, Jumbo Hoyle (Derek Farr), who uses his martial skills to bring about the downfall of a vicious gang leader who the police seem powerless to prosecute. Hoyle, a former commando

¹³⁰ BFI Library, BBFC Scenarios 1946-7 42/42a "South East Five" (*Dancing with Crime*)

¹³¹ Tim Pulleine, 'Spin a Dark Web' in *British Crime Cinema*, pp. 27-36., p. 29.

¹³² Clay, p. 57.

officer, is outraged that having spent six years of his life fighting fascism in Europe – ‘clearing out a couple of stinkers over there’ – he finds London plagued by a similar type of tyrant. Encouraged by his fiancée Linda (Carole Landis) who blames black-market criminals for the continued need for rationing, Hoyle organises a group of, mainly, ex-servicemen to disrupt the gang leader’s black-market activities and rough-up his henchmen.

The film certainly has its ‘humorous’ side: the character of Bar Gorman (Nigel Patrick), a spiv with a heart of gold, gives a touch of comedy to the film, as does the almost slapstick treatment of a pitched battle towards the end of the film.¹³³ However, at times the film paints as bleak a picture of post-war Britain as any film in this cycle, with two scenes of murder – both involving young women – being particularly dark.

Completing this cycle, *Night Beat* (1948) contains elements of all four previous films. Two returning commando sergeants, Don (Hector Ross) and Andy (Ronald Howard), find it difficult to obtain suitable employment and join the police force where they come into the orbit of Felix (Maxwell Reed), the head of a criminal network who avoided war service on account of a ‘weak heart’ and who has prospered while men like Don and Andy were away. Don does well in the police but Andy finds himself compromised by Felix, forced to resign from the police and, having drifted further into criminality, ends up in prison.

Andy’s drift into criminality sees this one-time war hero – it is revealed that he was awarded the Military Medal – out of his depth with both the film’s *femme fatale*, a figure often seen to embody a threat to perceived masculine roles, and further emasculated by Felix as illustrated by Andy’s submission to him of his commando knife, ‘his war-time souvenir and symbol of his more satisfying masculine role.’¹³⁴ However, like Clem in *Fugitive* and Dick in *Flamingo*, Andy redeems himself, rescuing

¹³³ Robert Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel: Cinema and Society in Britain 1939-49* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 162.

¹³⁴ Clay, p. 51., p. 55.

his friend Don from drowning and handing himself in to the police even though he fears he will be framed for murder.

As a group, these films were popular with audiences: *Fugitive* and *Noose* achieved major box-office success, *Dancing with Crime* appears to have enjoyed minor success, while *Flamingo* and *Night Beat* were likely shown as supporting features.¹³⁵ Audiences would seem to have been mainly adult and working class: *Kinematograph Weekly* considered all of these “A” certificate films except *Dancing with Crime* unsuitable for children, although *Monthly Film Bulletin*’s assessment that all bar *Fugitive* – a strictly adults-only film – were suitable for adolescents, suggests a slightly wider audience; and both *Kinematograph Weekly* and *Today’s Cinema* considered the films would appeal to working-class audiences: ‘the masses’ and ‘the ninepennies’.¹³⁶

Fugitive certainly attracted controversy from some critics – Arthur Vesello described it as ‘a tale of sordidness, corruption and violence almost unrelieved’ and Caroline Lejeune saw it as another regrettable example of ‘the modern insistence on violence and morbidity in film’ – and the release of *Noose* prompted one critic to call for cinema-goers to boycott British gangster films: ‘There is only one way to stop British producers making tasteless and senseless films like this – by you and you and you ceasing to contribute the shillings that make it possible.’¹³⁷ However, it was not only the quality press expressing concern about British crime films and the fact that critics from the popular press were expressing a similar sense of anxiety suggests that there were many potential cinema-goers who were dissuaded from seeing these films.¹³⁸

On the other hand, several critics identified a morally-uplifting element in these films. Clem Morgan was described as having discovered both ‘a new hope and the beginning of a new social conscience’ and Dick Tarleton as having turned from ‘potential thief

¹³⁵ *Kinematograph Weekly* 18 December 1947, *Kinematograph Weekly* 16 December 1948, *Kinematograph Weekly* 15 January 1948, *Kinematograph Weekly* 22 January 1948

¹³⁶ *Kinematograph Weekly* 26 June 1947, *Kinematograph Weekly* 3 July 1947, *Kinematograph Weekly* 15 January 1948, *Kinematograph Weekly* 22 January 1948, *Kinematograph Weekly* 19 August 1948, *MFB* July 1947, *Monthly Film Bulletin* August 1947, *Monthly Film Bulletin* February 1948, *Monthly Film Bulletin* March 1948, *Monthly Film Bulletin* September 1948, *Today’s Cinema* 17 August 1948

¹³⁷ *Sight and Sound* Autumn 1947, *Observer* 29 June 1947, *Evening Standard* 20 September 1948

¹³⁸ *News of the World* 29 June 1947, *Daily Mirror* 27 June 1947, *Daily Mail* 27 June 1947

into a hero'.¹³⁹ Indeed, *Dancing with Crime* was seen by some critics as something of a morality tale: a 'battle between justice and lawlessness' with a welcome absence of any 'glorification of crime' in which the country's returning heroes could be relied upon to bring their martial skills to play in the battle against a new enemy: 'Fortunately for virtue Richard Attenborough, as a taxi driver turned amateur detective, learned unarmed combat while winning a Military Medal at Tobruk, and with the aid of his girlfriend, Sheila Sim, he defeats the villains almost single handed.'¹⁴⁰

Publicity material suggests that film-makers were keen to engage audiences with a topical issue. *Fugitive* was described as exploring 'the new London underworld grown rich on black-market loot – nylons, perfumes, whisky' complete with imitations of newspaper front-pages featuring the sort of 'gangster' stories hitting 'the headlines day after day' and viewers of *Dancing with Crime* were promised 'thrills' in a story of 'two demobilised ex-servicemen who run into adventures in post-war London'.¹⁴¹ In addition, references in reviews to the films' topicality suggest that audiences saw the films as exploring a current problem.¹⁴²

Further evidence of the authenticity of these films' depictions of post-war Britain can be found in the reaction to *Fugitive* from the British Board of Film Censors and the critic Arthur Vessollo. The censors were uneasy about scenes of drug dealing and violence in this 'unpleasant film' but concluded that as it was a realistic depiction of life its production could not be prevented and Vessolo's hostility can be explained in part by his conviction that the film was, sadly, a realistic picture of post-war Britain in which the returning pilot was 'an unconscious personification of decent humanity demoralized by war and unfitted for peace' and his struggles 'sinister reflections of our own state today'.¹⁴³ Furthermore, Vessollo's and Lejeune's unease about the film was

¹³⁹ *Tribune* 4 July 1947, *Kinematograph Weekly* 15 January 1948

¹⁴⁰ *Today's Cinema* 27 June 1947, *Evening News* 8 August 1947, *Sunday Express* 10 August 1947

¹⁴¹ BFI Library *They Made Me a Fugitive* small press-book (1947), *Dancing with Crime* medium press-book (1947)

¹⁴² *Today's Cinema* 25 June 1947, *Today's Cinema* 27 June 1947, *Today's Cinema* 16 June 1948, *Monthly Film Bulletin* February 1948

¹⁴³ BBFC Scenario Reports 41/41a, *Sight and Sound* Autumn 1947

related to what they identified in the film as the influence of German Expressionism, a genre that had recently been linked by Siegfried Krakaur to the chaos and violence of post-First- World-War Germany and to the rise of National Socialism.¹⁴⁴

2.2 A Deserter's Tale – *Man on the Run*

British cinema audiences were familiar with both black-marketers and, as minor characters, draft dodgers. However, only one film features as its main protagonist a representative of the third element of what one writer has called the 'enemy within', the deserter, a character that cinema audiences would have been familiar with, if only by reputation: estimates suggest that around one per cent of all servicemen deserted during 1941 and around 80,000 men had deserted from the army by October 1944, that there were thousands of deserters at large in London during the last months of the war and around 20,000 unpardoned deserters at large in Britain after the end of hostilities.¹⁴⁵

In *Man on the Run* (1949) Peter Burden (Derek Farr) is a deserter, down on his luck, who is wrongly suspected of involvement in a botched robbery that leaves a police officer dead. The film deals sympathetically with Peter. First, it is established that he fought bravely before his desertion, something reinforced by the medal ribbons in evidence in the alternative ending. Second, he explains his reason for desertion: having been denied an extension to compassionate leave to stay with his dying sister and mother following an air raid, he felt he had no option but to desert and would do so again. Third, he shows great bravery – and receives gunshot wounds – when, assisted by his girlfriend Jean's detective work, he helps track down the men who murdered the police officer.

¹⁴⁴ Krakauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*

¹⁴⁵ Gardner, p. 607., Waller, p. 271., David Thomas, *The Enemy Within: Hucksters, Racketeers, Deserters and Civilians During the Second World War* (New York: New York University Press, 2003)

In addition, despite several characters in the film voicing their hostility towards deserters and expressing the view that they are at the heart of a widespread crime wave, Peter is allowed to make the case for pardoning other deserters:

Jean, do you know how many deserters there are? Nearly twenty thousand. Twenty thousand men on the run all over the country. Men with no hope and no future unless they'd like to give themselves up and go to jail. That's just what they won't do and it's no good thinking they will. They all had some reason for deserting. Human nature is human nature all the world over, that's what the authorities won't make allowance for. If those men were allowed to start afresh with a clean slate, they'd all become useful members of the community again. As it is, most of them are forced to live by crime. Crime of every sort, including murder. Now that's what I'm wanted for!

The film ends in a military court where Peter is informed that neither his previous war record, nor the circumstances at the time of his desertion, nor his subsequent bravery can be accepted as an excuse for his dereliction of duty and he is sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment: something made easier by Jean's assurance that she will be waiting for him. That an alternative ending, set in a civilian court in which the judge decides to allow Peter to go free on account of his bravery, was filmed but not used suggests that the film's makers had concluded that potential audiences might be deterred by such a sympathetic treatment of deserters. In fact, despite predictions that this 'topical' film would be successful, the film made no impact at the box-office, suggesting that even with an ending that called for Peter's 'surrender and fresh start', many people could not bring themselves to watch a film that treated deserters with sympathy.¹⁴⁶

2.3 War Neurosis – *Mine Own Executioner* and *The Clouded Yellow*

Following the evacuation of Dunkirk it was noticed that some of the men returning to Britain were displaying symptoms – uncontrollable tremors, sleeplessness, nightmares, hysterical fits and a tendency to be startled by noise – similar to those displayed by

¹⁴⁶ *Kinematograph Weekly* 15 December 1949, *Kinematograph Weekly* 28 April 1949, *Today's Cinema* 22 April 1949, *Monthly Film Bulletin* May 1949

sufferers of what became known as shell shock during the First World War and it has been estimated that during the Second World War psychiatric casualties, ranging from the mild to the severe, accounted for between 2 per cent and 30 per cent of all casualties, depending on the type of battle.¹⁴⁷ By this time attitudes had changed from the widespread belief among the British public that 'any soldier who gave up the fight or otherwise behaved in an unmilitary manner was a coward and a disgrace' towards a recognition that many of the men executed for either cowardice or desertion – out of a total of 346 men executed, 266 were for desertion and 18 for cowardice – 'might well have been suffering from war neuroses when they committed the derelictions for which they were condemned' and in 1930 the Army and Air Force Bill removed the death penalty for both desertion and acts of cowardice.¹⁴⁸ However, many in the senior ranks of the military continued in their belief that giving up the fight was cowardice, something that can be seen in the RAF's decision to classify men displaying signs of war neurosis as suffering from a failure of will and to designate them as wavering or, later, LMF (lacking moral fibre).¹⁴⁹

It has been noted that *Mine Own Executioner* (1947) is the only post-war British film to feature a central character suffering from acute war neurosis.¹⁵⁰ However, one other film, *The Clouded Yellow* (1950), features a central character who, although largely recovered, has clearly suffered from some sort of war neurosis in the past and retains an aversion to captivity. Interestingly, in both films the characters concerned were traumatised by the experience of captivity, interrogation and torture, an experience which would appear to have particularly serious and prolonged psychological effects.¹⁵¹

In *Executioner*, set shortly after the war, a psychologist, Felix Milne (Burgess Meredith), is called on to treat Adam Lucien (Kieron Moore) a former fighter pilot who had been

¹⁴⁷ Anthony Babington, *Shell-Shock: A History of Changing Attitudes to War Neurosis* (London: Leo Cooper, 1997), pp. 141-3. John Keegan, *The Face of Battle: A Story of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme* (London: Penguin, 1978), pp. 334-5.

¹⁴⁸ Wendy Holden, *Shell Shock: The Psychological Impact of War* (London: Channel 4 Books, 1997), p. 26. Babington, p. 136.

¹⁴⁹ Holden, pp. 107-8.

¹⁵⁰ Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, p. 189.

¹⁵¹ Eric Lomax, *The Railway Man* (London: Vintage, 1996)

captured by the Japanese who has been behaving strangely and has recently tried to strangle his wife. During their consultations, it is revealed that Adam was beaten, interrogated and tortured during his time in captivity before escaping after disabling one of the guards. However, despite making progress with respect to his wartime experiences, Felix suspects that Adam is still deeply unsettled, something confirmed when, in a state of confusion, Adam shoots his wife dead and kills himself by jumping off a high building.

With a screenplay based on his own book from Nigel Balchin, who had spent part of the war working in the Psychological Warfare Department of the War Office, further authenticity was achieved by the employment of a psychiatrist as a technical advisor.¹⁵² Perhaps surprisingly given the film's controversial subject matter, the censors' anxieties centred on instances of blasphemy and references to sex rather than the subject of war neurosis.¹⁵³ However, they recommended there should be restraint in scenes of torture and strangulation and no mention made of a drug used to encourage Adam to talk.¹⁵⁴

The film is significant in the way it depicts both the symptoms of war neurosis and the events that lead to it. Adam's symptoms – being described as 'not there' and having his 'back to you' – are described before he is seen on screen and when he first appears his speech and movements are slow and uneasy, entirely consistent with instructions in the script to convey a sense of disengagement: 'Lucian, like all schizos, can go through all the formal motions, but mentally he is only using one hand. It is this "not-thereness" which must be put across.'¹⁵⁵ In addition, a scene referred to as the 'drug sequence' in the script attempts to create on screen Adam's confused and disjointed memories of the events which had so severely traumatised him:

¹⁵² BFI Library, Michael Powell Collection *The Small Back Room* information folder, notes on Nigel Balchin; Burgess Meredith, *So Far, So Good: A Memoir* (London: Little, Brown and co, 1994), p. 174; Dulcie Gray, *Looking Forward – Looking Back: An Autobiography* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1991), p. 98.

¹⁵³ BFI Library, BBFC Scenarios 1946-7 (49/49a) "Mine Own Executioner"

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ BFI Library, S.14841 *Mine Own Executioner* final shooting script (n.d.)

During this drug sequence we see the high spots of Lucian's captivity as pictured through his own eyes and remembered in his confused mind. In other words, the camera is inside his head. While certain details are clear in his memory and therefore crystal clear on the screen, the background is blurred both in his own mind and on the screen. This particularly applies to the edges of the screen which are furthest from his focal point. The same applies to sound effects. Vividly remembered noises such as the burst of Ack-Ack, the approach of a Jap in the jungle, etc can be exaggerated legitimately, but Jap dialogue etc is a blurred jibber-jabber and must be recorded as such.¹⁵⁶

This sequence begins with Adam counting backwards while the drug takes effect as the ticking clock in the consulting room turns into a dial in the cockpit of his spitfire. Subsequently, he recounts a crash landing, being captured and beaten unconscious, refusing to reveal anything to his interrogators and, finally, escaping after hitting a Japanese sentry over the head. The sequence is punctuated with shots of Felix questioning Lucian who is clearly in a state of distress. An absence of long shots and the inclusion of close-up shots of Adam's interrogator against a featureless background create a sense of claustrophobia that emphasises Lucian's sense of anxiety and disorientation.

Later, the scene in which Lucian kills his wife sees another attempt by the film-makers to project onto the screen Adam's confused state of mind, with the script describing how the sight of his wife in semi-darkness, swinging her handbag to-and-fro as the Japanese sentry had swung his helmet shortly before Adam's escape, transports him back in time to the Japanese prison camp: 'As she stands silhouetted against the moonlight, she swings her handbag idly to-and-fro with an almost identical movement to that which the Jap swings his helmet. She goes slightly out of focus, and the vague impression of a Jap swinging his helmet is superimposed.'¹⁵⁷

Adam is presented as a dutiful and courageous former serviceman, having flown Spitfires and received the Distinguished Flying Cross, who has been severely traumatised by extreme circumstances – imprisonment, interrogation and torture at the hands of the Japanese – rather than as someone who was prone to mental

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

breakdown or a coward. In Balchin's novel Lucian had suffered a trauma in childhood which is hinted at but not fully developed in the film, causing one critic to complain about the film's 'failure to define the root cause of the airman's malaise'.¹⁵⁸ However, it seems reasonable to conclude that most viewers would have assumed, along with several critics at the time, that his problems were entirely the result of his wartime experiences and see him as simply 'a victim of war neurosis'.¹⁵⁹

Although less central to the plot, and less severe in its extent, the subject of war neurosis never-the-less plays a significant part in *The Clouded Yellow* in which David Somers (Trevor Howard), a former member of the Special Operations Executive who had subsequently joined the Secret Intelligence Service but been dismissed following a botched job, helps Sophie (Jean Simmons) escape from the police when she is wrongly suspected of the murder of the local handyman. It is revealed that Somers had been captured, imprisoned, interrogated and tortured by the Gestapo, before escaping and, although his resumption of Intelligence work suggests that he largely recovered, two aspects of his character suggest he still bears the scars of his captivity.

First, he develops a deep empathy with Sophie – whose state of depression is later revealed to be the result of a traumatic childhood experience that she has repressed: witnessing the murder of her parents – telling her that he knows what it is to experience despair and times when 'even the sun looks grey and self-pity's such a dreary thing you despise yourself and wonder if it matters if you go on living or not.' Second, Somers has a deep aversion to any form of trap: intervening to stop the local handyman trapping rabbits by buying all his traps at an inflated price and helping spring Sophie from the trap that would see her convicted of a murder that she did not commit. This theme of escaping from a trap is illustrated visually as the film moves from claustrophobic setting of dark, narrow steps leading down to the River Tyne in Newcastle to the open spaces of the Lake District where the rings of police officers closing in on them resembles a snare tightening.

¹⁵⁸ Nigel Balchin, *Mine Own Executioner* (London: Collins, 1976); *News Chronicle* 22 November 1947

¹⁵⁹ *Today's Cinema* 19 November 1947, *Sunday Telegraph* 23 November 1947, *Daily Telegraph* 24 November 1947

The traumatised Sophie is one of a number of female characters in British films of this period suffering from some sort of neurosis. There is also, as seen in the previous chapter, the grief-stricken Diana Wentworth who talks to the husband she believes has been killed in action in *Years Between*, the recently-widowed Judy Dawson who confuses her brother-in-law with her late husband in *Frieda*, and Yvonne Winter in *Woman with No Name* whose amnesia might not be the result of injuries sustained during the Blitz. In addition, several other films of the period feature central female characters that contemplate, attempt or commit suicide: Francesca (Anne Todd) in *The Seventh Veil*; Laura Jesson (Celia Johnson) in *Brief Encounter* (1945); Mary Justin (Todd) in *The Passionate Friends* (1945); Victoria Page (Moirá Shearer) in *The Red Shoes* (1948); Pearl Bond (Googie Withers) in *Pink String and Sealing Wax* (1945); Rose Sandigate (Withers) in *It Always Rains on Sunday* (1945). It would seem likely that such films reflect the widespread trauma suffered by women as well as men during the war.

Neither film achieved major box-office success, although *Executioner* may have enjoyed minor success mainly, it would appear, among adult and middle-class audiences: 'adult and intelligent entertainment', 'better-class audiences'.¹⁶⁰ *Clouded Yellow*, despite its universal appeal – suitable for children and appealing to 'both sexes and all classes', a good proposition 'for any audience' – failed, possibly because audiences shared the view of several critics that the film's ending was unsatisfactory.¹⁶¹ One critic in particular was unhappy with a tendency for films to be made which 'explored the darker coast of the human mind', opining that that *Executioner* faced 'the depressing fact that the abysses of the subconscious are dark, deep and terrible', significantly, tracing the trend back to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), another expression of concern, from the quality press, regarding the influence of German expressionist cinema on British post-war cinema.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ *Kinematograph Weekly* 16 December 1948, *Kinematograph Weekly* 14 December 1950, *Sunday Graphic* 23 November 1947, *Kinematograph Weekly* 29 November 1947

¹⁶¹ *Kinematograph Weekly* 9 November 1950, *Today's Cinema* 30 October 1950, *Daily Express* 24 November 1950, *News of the World* 26 November 1950, *Daily Mail* 24 November 1950, *Sunday Dispatch* 26 November 1950, *Reynolds News* 26 November 1950

¹⁶² *Daily Telegraph* 24 November 1947

2.4 Ghosts from the Past – *Silent Dust*, *Cage of Gold* and *Circle of Danger*

Between 1949 and 1951 three films were released in which the war years are shown to retain the power to unsettle and disrupt the present. In *Silent Dust* (1949) and *Cage of Gold* (1950), lives are turned upside down by the reappearance of someone last seen during the war and in *Circle of Danger* (1951), like *Silent Dust*, people are forced to face the truth about events during the war.

In *Silent Dust* a grieving father, about to dedicate a sports pavilion to the memory of his son who he believes to have died a hero's death in the war, is forced to face the reality that his son was a coward who deserted his comrades and later lived as a criminal. The image that the blind Sir Robert Rawley has of his son, Simon (Nigel Patrick), at the beginning of the film – as a fine and noble young man whose heroic death is a loss not only to his family but to the whole community – is captured in two items: a painting showing Simon as a dashing sportsman who has just made a century at Lords and a memorial plaque dedicated to a brave young man who gave his life for his country. However, Sir Robert's picture of his son is contradicted when the criminal for whom the police are searching, and who has broken into Sir Robert's house, turns out to be none other than Simon who was not killed in battle but is, it transpires, a deserter who has been living as a criminal and it is significant that when Simon is first seen clearly on the screen he is laughing mockingly at the portrait his father has had painted of him. During the film the difference between Sir Robert's picture of his son and the reality of Simon's true nature, and the effect he has on the lives of others, is shown visually in several ways. First, the darkness of Simon's character is suggested by *chiaroscuro* lighting with Simon first seen fleetingly in half-light, at one point with only his eyes fully visible, and his first appearance to his former wife, like a ghost from the past, is presaged by darkness. Second, in one of two highly inventive sequences, Simon's duplicity is laid bare visually in what the screenplay termed the 'lying flashback': a scene in which the 'visual flashback' is contradicted by the 'spoken

narrative'.¹⁶³ Simon's account of why he left the battlefield and why he has only now returned home – that he was suffering from some form of shell-shock at the time of his desertion and feared he would be punished if he returned to his unit – are contradicted by images on the screen which show that what he is describing 'and what actually happened are two very different things': that he exchanged identities with a fallen comrade and lived as a criminal.¹⁶⁴ Third, as well as representing Sir Robert's mistaken image of Simon, his portrait is used at one point in the film to symbolise the power he has to disrupt the present. When Simon's former wife and her new husband discuss their future together and the disapproval they anticipate from those who consider Simon a hero, despite her assertion that he was a bully, the scene is framed so that Simon's portrait appears, looming large, between them.

In addition to the 'lying flashback', the film contains a second visually inventive sequence, an attempt to capture the way in which Sir Robert, unsettled by the unseen presence of the son he believes to be dead, "sees" his surroundings:

The sitting room is now as ROBERT would imagine it to be. The blacks and whites are accentuated, there are no patterns on the chair covers, carpet or curtains. The room is sectioned into faint squares, the squares by which he places the various articles of furniture. Of the pictures, only those he thinks about are there, but the portrait of Simon stands out clearly.¹⁶⁵

In *Cage of Gold* the ghost from the past comes in the form of Bill Glennon (David Farrar), a one-time dashing RAF pilot whose reappearance in the life of Judith Somers (Jean Simmons) causes her to abandon her fiancé Alan (James Donald), the dependable but less dashing doctor in an East-End practice. In a film that explores the problems of post-war adjustment, Bill represents the danger, excitement and glamour of the early years of the war. Indeed, that the Battle of Britain was Bill's "finest hour" is made clear by his choosing to wear his RAF uniform for a portrait he persuades Judith to paint of him, and the obvious delight he takes in presenting himself to Judith as the glamorous pilot with whom she was so besotted as a girl:

¹⁶³ BFI Library, S.14470 *Silent Dust* shooting script (30/3/48), *Times* 7 February 1949

¹⁶⁴ S.14470

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

He stands in front of the big sloping window with the clear North light behind him. He has removed his coat and wears the jacket of an R.A.F. Wing Commander, a row of medal ribbons above the left pocket. He looks good. The uniform – as obviously the life must have done – suits him down to the ground.¹⁶⁶

As in *Silent Dust*, the portrait serves to illustrate the disruption caused by the reappearance of someone from the past. A shot is framed in which Bill's portrait separates Alan and Judith, echoing an earlier shot in which Bill is seen sitting between the couple in a restaurant. However, this wartime hero is ill-suited to peacetime and has been making a living as a smuggler. His explanation for this – that all the war has taught him is 'shooting down aeroplanes' – recalls that of Clem and Dick in *Fugitive* and *Flamingo* respectively, as does publicity material for the film:

Bill ... was a Battle of Britain hero when Judith Moray first came into his life as a schoolgirl admirer. Both have changed since those days – Judith physically, Bill morally ... Bill has changed little on the surface, and there is nothing in his manner to denote his disillusionment with Civvy Street and his gradual drifting into the excitement of currency smuggling and any other questionable means of making easy money!¹⁶⁷

However, while Clem and Dick redeem themselves before the end of their respective films, no act of redemption is performed by Bill. Indeed, it has been suggested that not only has Bill changed little, if at all, since the war but also that characteristics he possessed would have been an asset to him, and his country, during wartime.¹⁶⁸ Bill represents present danger in a film which can be seen as a metaphor for post-war adjustment. Judith must choose between the exciting, devil-may-care Bill – whose world of excitement and glamour is represented in a montage of fairground and nightclub scenes – and the dutiful, dependable but dull Alan. By the end of the film it is Alan's sense of duty to others – shown by his devotion to Judith and her son and by his decision to continue as a local doctor rather than pursue wealth and status in a West-End practice – that wins the day. As such, the film carries a message about post-war Britain needing a different type of hero in peacetime. In addition to Bill's unsuitability

¹⁶⁶ BFI Library, S.31 *Cage of Gold* revised final shooting script (3/2/50)

¹⁶⁷ BFI Library, Michael Balcon Collection (G/62) *Cage of Gold* publicity leaflet

¹⁶⁸ Alan Burton and Tim O'Sullivan, *The Cinema of Basil Dearden and Michael Relph* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 105.

to the post-war future, the film also suggests that Judith's own recklessness and irresponsibility is out of place and it has been suggested that Judith's transformation from unfaithful fiancée to dutiful housewife and mother during the course of the film can be seen as a response to post-war anxieties about female sexual liberation dating back to the war years.¹⁶⁹

While there is no reappearance of the younger brother of Clay Douglas (Ray Milland) in *Circle of Danger*, Clay is haunted by the suspicion that there was more to his brother's death on a commando raid than contained in the official report. These suspicions grow as he travels around England and Scotland interviewing the few surviving members of his brother's former unit until eventually he is convinced that his brother was killed by someone on his own side, most likely his commanding officer Hamish McArran (Hugh Sinclair). As such, the film is the only example of a British war film in which the official version of events is brought into question. However, in the end Clay is satisfied with the explanation that McArran had no choice but to kill his brother whose irresponsible behaviour had been putting the entire operation at risk and endangering the lives of all the men on it. The film is also memorable for cameo performances by Marius Goring as a former commando turned ballet impresario and Naunton Wayne as a former Intelligence officer making a living as a car dealer, down on his luck and practiced at turning every opportunity to his advantage.

Neither *Cage of Gold* nor *Circle of Danger* excited audiences or critics.¹⁷⁰ However, although *Silent Dust* was damned with faint praise by some reviewers - 'workmanlike', 'competent', 'fairly enthralling', 'fairly successful' – it appears to have achieved major box-office success.¹⁷¹ Significantly, two critics noted the sense of unease that is present in *Circle of Danger* in that for many characters in the film the war is something that, for one reason or another, they would rather not talk about.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ John Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-1963* (London: BFI, 1986), p. 69.

¹⁷⁰ *Kinematograph Weekly* 14 December 1950, *Kinematograph Weekly* 20 December 1951

¹⁷¹ *Daily Express* 4 February 1949, *Observer* 6 February 1949, *Sunday Dispatch* 6 February 1949, *Reynold's News* 6 February 1949, *Kinematograph Weekly* 15 December 1949

¹⁷² *Observer* 22 April 1951, *Evening Standard* 19 April 1951

Conclusion

In these films, the war again appears as a source of disruption with returning Servicemen tempted into a life of crime or suffering from shell-shock. Again, audience's fears of the effects of this disruption are largely assuaged, particularly when Servicemen eventually turn their backs on a life of crime or even take a stance against the criminals. Two of the returning Servicemen films proved very popular with audiences and there is evidence from reviews, censors' reports and press-books to suggest that film-makers and audiences were engaging with a particularly topical issue. It would also appear that audiences had little sympathy with deserters.

Chapter 3 – Adventure Films

3.1 Spy Stories – *Night Boat to Dublin*, *I See a Dark Stranger*, *The Lisbon Story*, *Eyes That Kill* and *Castle Sinister*

Shortly after its ending, the Second World War became the setting for a resurgence of the spy film genre with five films – *Night Boat to Dublin* (1946), *I See a Dark Stranger* (1946), *The Lisbon Story* (1946), *Eyes That Kill* (1947) and *Castle Sinister* (1948) – released in quick succession. These films convey an underlying sense of anxiety in imagining how Germany's attempts to uncover atomic secrets and Allied invasion plans were only just frustrated.

Night Boat is a conventional espionage thriller in which a British Intelligence officer, Captain David Grant (Robert Newton), must discover the whereabouts of a German atomic scientist who had sought refuge in Britain but who is now being held somewhere in England by German agents. The film is the first to raise the question of what things might have been like had the Germans been able to develop an atomic bomb and as Grant explains the vital importance of their mission to a colleague it is possible to imagine members of the cinema shuddering at the thought that things might have been very different:

Wilson, have you ever stopped to think exactly what it would mean if Hansen succeeds with this atomic bomb business and the wrong people should get their hands on it? Imagine. All the explosive power they want from nothing, just out of the air. Think of it, as a bombing weapon it means obliteration. A whole town, a whole city, wiped out in the fraction of a second.

The film also has an unsettling air in that the Fifth Columnists appear to be pillars of the establishment – a solicitor, Paul Faber (Raymond Lovell), his chief clerk and a well-to-do woman described as having some 'powerful friends' – and there are suggestions of the ease with which people can be corrupted: Faber's treachery owes more to his gambling debts than to a belief in Nazi ideology and the ship's steward who helps Faber to avoid arrest is motivated by money to satisfy the aspirations of his unfaithful wife.

The secret, the search for which drives the narrative in *I See a Dark Stranger* – the story of an Irish girl, Bridie Quilty (Deborah Kerr), who so hates the British that she volunteers to spy for the Germans – is not the atomic bomb but the exact location of the Allied invasion. Like *Night Boat*, the film contains a scene that might have sent shivers down the spines of audience members. Having acquired a notebook containing details of the location of the Allied invasion, Bridie imagines what might happen if she passes it to the Germans: the screen showing Allied troops landing on the Normandy beaches only to be gunned down by well-hidden German weaponry. Like *Night Boat*, *Stranger* features Fifth Columnists who seem pillars of the establishment: Miller (Raymond Huntley), the man who recruits Bridie, seems the epitome of an English gentleman, and an agent who Bridie was to contact appears to be, outwardly at least, an entirely harmless elderly lady (Katie Johnson). In addition, the film contains scenes in which expressionist/*film noir*-style visual effects are used to underline the film's thematic darkness: Bridie's wrestling with her conscience before she helps the Germans and her disposal of Miller's body after he dies of gunshot wounds following an unsuccessful attempt to free a German spy.

However, the film has moments of comedy centred around hapless, even bumbling, Intelligence officers: one (David Tomlinson) complains about a lack of excitement and career prospects while German agents free the prisoner he is supposed to be guarding and two others, Goodhusband and Spanswick – in parts for which it was originally intended that Basil Radford and Naunton Wayne recreate the characters of Caldicott and Charters first seen in *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) – frequently miss opportunities to apprehend Bridie.¹⁷³ Interestingly, a scene detailed in the script, in which German agents avoid capture because of incompetence on the part of the Home Guard did not make the final cut, possibly indicating a sense of reverence for this particular institution.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ BFI Library, S.4513 *I See a Dark Stranger* shooting script (4/6/45)

¹⁷⁴ Ibid

Based on a stage musical, *Lisbon Story* is a curious mixture of espionage thriller and musical with around half the film taken up with set-piece song-and-dance routines that generally do little to advance the plot. The other half of the film concerns the attempt by a British Intelligence officer, David Warren (David Farrar), to prevent the Germans capturing a French atomic scientist, Professor Sargon, who has swapped identities with his assistant and who is currently being held in a concentration camp. The film has its darker moments, accompanied by an expressionist/*film-noir* visual style, such as when Sargon's assistant is tortured in a scene in which a venetian blind casts ribbons of light into a darkened room and henchmen are silhouetted against a moonlit sky, before he is shot 'with absolute calm' by one them.¹⁷⁵ The censors, however, considered the story 'suitable for production as a film' and raised only minor concerns.¹⁷⁶

Eyes That Kill imagines a post-war world in which the various Allied zones within Germany are being destabilised by a terrorist group made up of embittered Nazis who have managed to evade capture. This group, "Eyes that Kill", is able to help Martin Bormann escape to England where, with the help of recently-activated sleeper cells, he tries to capture a German atomic scientist who has sought refuge there. Audiences troubled by the thought of fugitive Nazis acquiring atomic secrets in Britain would have been less than reassured by the failure of British Military Intelligence to prevent the scientist's kidnap and subsequent death under torture. In addition, the film ends on a note of menace when although Bormann appears to drown in the London sewers his body is never found.

The film contains several particularly interesting scenes. The film begins in Hitler's bunker shortly before his suicide where his presence is established by the sound of a ranting voice. Soon a shot is heard and Hitler's death confirmed when members of his staff are informed that they may now smoke. Later, two intercut scenes appear to comment on the contrasting treatment of prisoners in Britain and in Nazi Germany. In the first, the German scientist, who has informed his captors that they 'can't get away with this in England', is bound and gagged by his Nazi capturers who are about to use a

¹⁷⁵ BFI Library, S.152 *The Lisbon Story* shooting script (n.d.)

¹⁷⁶ BFI Library, BBFC Scenario Reports 1946-7 (131/131a) "The Lisbon Story"

whip on him. This scene then cuts to a captured Nazi agent being interrogated by British officers who inform him that in England 'we have no Dachau' and that he will be tried in an English criminal court. However, a threat to hand the agent to the Polish military authorities suggests a willingness to turn a blind eye to torture if not to engage in it.

In *Castle Sinister* – an ultra-low-budget film that combines the espionage thriller with the haunted house murder mystery – an Intelligence officer is sent to investigate the death of a British officer stationed in a remote part of northern Scotland dominated by an ancient castle, the home of the local aristocracy. He discovers that the officer's recent replacement has also disappeared and that the locals believe that they are the victims of a phantom that walks the castle. Eventually, he discovers that they were murdered by the half-brother of the Laird in order to protect the true identity of a medical officer who is spying for the Germans and the film ends with the treacherous officer frustrated in his attempts to pass on vital information to the Germans.

None of these films appears to have enjoyed any commercial success and *Eyes That Kill* and *Castle Sinister* would likely have been shown as supporting features.¹⁷⁷ Cinema-goers considering going to see *I See a Dark Stranger* might have shared the unease of two critics regarding being asked to sympathise with a woman who was driven by a hatred of the British and those considering *Lisbon Story* may have agreed with critics who felt that the film suffered from trying to be both spy story and musical and would suffer from comparison with Hollywood musicals.¹⁷⁸

Despite its lack of commercial success, *Night Boat to Dublin* is significant as the first film to deal with the theme of the atomic bomb. One reviewer considered that its producers had 'discovered the box-office value of topicality' while another predicted that the atomic bomb would 'supersede all other secrets as a subject for a spy

¹⁷⁷ *Kinematograph Weekly* 19 December 1946, *Kinematograph Weekly* 18 December 1947, *Kinematograph Weekly* 16 December 1948, *Today's Cinema* 27 August 1947, *Kinematograph Weekly* 26 February 1948

¹⁷⁸ *Sunday Express* 7 July 1946, *Daily Telegraph* (BFI Microfiche undated clipping), *Daily Mail* 8 March 1946, *News of the World* 10 March 1946

drama'.¹⁷⁹ However, only a few months later with the release of *Lisbon Story* one critic was complaining that the subject of the atomic bomb was by now 'topical but already hackneyed'.¹⁸⁰ In fact, *Night Boat*, *Lisbon Story* and *Eyes That Kill* were joined by only one other film to feature the atomic bomb during the immediate post-war period, something one writer has ascribed to a desire by the government to avoid discussion of the subject.¹⁸¹

3.2 The Documentary Influence – *The Overlanders*, *School for Secrets*, *School for Danger/Now It Can Be Told*, *Against the Wind*, *Odetta*, *They Were Not Divided* and *The Wooden Horse*

Seven films released between 1946 and 1950 see an attempt to recapture actual or representative wartime events. In some of them the ever-present sense of anxiety seen in the films discussed so far is largely absent, although it is certainly present in two of them: *Against the Wind* and *Odetta*. A key feature of these films is their incorporation of some, but not all, of the key features of the documentary film movement. It is often argued that the British documentary film movement, which had its origins in the GPO film unit in the 1930s and its flowering in the social realism of the People's War films during the years of conflict, went into decline during the late 1940s.¹⁸² However, there can be no doubt that certain aspects of the documentary tradition lived on in those post-war British films that sought to recreate actual or representative events or experiences of the war. The defining features of the documentary tradition – authentic and believable storylines, realistic characters that are representative of all social classes, authentic settings and dialogue, exterior location filming as opposed to studio-based filming and the use of non-professional actors – can be found, in varying degrees, in the films considered in the remainder of the chapter. It is interesting to note, however, how the use of non-professional actors,

¹⁷⁹ *Kinematograph Weekly* 17 January 1946, *Guardian* 19 February 1946

¹⁸⁰ *Daily Herald* 9 March 1946

¹⁸¹ Tony Shaw, *British Cinema and the Cold War: The State, Propaganda and Consensus* (London: IB Taurus, 2001), p. 117.

¹⁸² Elizabeth Sussex, *The Rise and Fall of British Documentary: The Story of the Film Movement Founded by John Grierson* (London: University of California Press, 1975), pp. ix-xii.

sometimes described as non-actors, declines as the decade draws to a close as does the degree of social inclusiveness.

Made by documentary pioneer Harry Watt, *The Overlanders* (1946) – described in opening captions as a true story featuring fictitious characters – is an account of how the Australians pursued a “scorched earth” policy in the Northern Territories to dissuade the Japanese from attempting an invasion and follows a group of cattle-herders as they move thousands of cattle 1600 miles over a period of 8 months. Watt, who had originally intended to make a commando film, later reflected that he had been troubled by doubts that documentary reconstructions of wartime events could no longer compete with films like *Desert Victory* (1943) that used actuality footage, or with feature films – ‘films with a hero’ – set during the war and had opted for ‘a war story that wasn’t a war story’.¹⁸³

The documentary tradition is apparent from the beginning, with a montage sequence showing the inhabitants of the Northern Territories destroying anything that could be of use to the Japanese in the event of an invasion, and continues in the film’s attention to detail in its depiction of the life and work of the drovers. The film’s emphasis is on spectacle and adventure – the group encounters crocodile-infested rivers, stampeding cattle, narrow ridges, boggy terrain, poisonous weeds and water shortages – and it also has something of the “we’re all in this together” feel of the People’s War films with its focus on working people and its powerful female characters.

The film was a major box-office success and this U certificate film would likely have been seen by both family as well as general – ‘the crowd’ – audiences.¹⁸⁴ The producers had sought to position *Overlanders* as ‘great romantic adventure’ and one critic certainly concurred, seeing it as a challenge to Hollywood’s dominance of the Western genre itself.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ BFI Library, *The Overlanders* medium press-book (1946); Sussex, pp. 174-5.

¹⁸⁴ *Kinematograph Weekly* 19 December 1946 *Kinematograph Weekly* 26 September 1946

¹⁸⁵ Press-book, *Sunday Express* 6 October 1946

Similarly based upon actual events but featuring fictional characters, *School for Secrets* (1946) tells how a group of eminent scientists is recruited to develop the existing direction-finding technology into a sophisticated system for detecting incoming enemy aircraft and guiding Allied aircraft onto targets in enemy-occupied territory. The inclusive nature of the film can be seen from its opening credits: 'Although this film deals almost exclusively with the RAF it is intended as a tribute to all scientists, to the men and women of all ranks in the three services, and the civilians who worked side by side with them on the development of radar.' Furthermore, a group of WAAF recruits, first seen on a route march, soon takes responsibility for operating radar equipment despite the doubts of some of the men that they will prove capable of 'technical' work and a montage sequence shows factory workers producing and assembling the radar equipment. The documentary influence is apparent throughout the film: opening credits include a number of military personnel listed as technical advisors as well as an acknowledgement of the assistance from the Air Ministry, the Admiralty and the War Office; a lecture is used to outline the basic features of radar as it existed at the beginning of the war and a chess board is used to explain the use of radar as a guidance system.

Despite a number of positive reviews – 'a first-class piece of entertainment', 'good, good, good', 'thrilling ... engrossing' – the film appears to have made little impact at the box-office.¹⁸⁶ Possible explanations include uncertainty regarding type of film – a 'dramatic comedy of action', a 'documentary with Service advice' and a 'clever mixture of documentary and drama' – and unease about try to make people laugh about 'a grave phase of the war when our very existence as a nation was threatened.'¹⁸⁷

Three films released between 1947 and 1950 featuring the work of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), the organisation set up in 1941 with instructions from the Prime Minister Winston Churchill to set Europe ablaze by assisting and organising resistance movements in occupied Europe – *Now It Can Be Told/School for Danger*

¹⁸⁶ *Reynolds News* 10 November 1946, *Daily Express* 8 November 1946, *People* 10 November 1946, *Kinematograph Weekly* 19 December 1946

¹⁸⁷ *Sunday Times* 10 November 1946, *Observer* 10 November 1946, *People* 10 November 1946

(1944), *Against the Wind* and *Odette* – constitute the first post-war cycle of combat-oriented war films. Although not released until 1947, filming of *Now It Can Be Told* had begun in 1944 under conditions of top security in the secret training camps of the SOE and the film was intended primarily as a record of their work in collaboration with members of the French Resistance, rather than for release in cinemas.¹⁸⁸

Commandants of the various SOE training camps were requested to assist with the filming of a ten minute sequence, giving a ‘truthful and characteristic impression rather than a comprehensive picture’ of SOE training, in which two agents would be shown going through various stages of training including ‘toughening’ as well as weapons and parachute drills.¹⁸⁹ Commandants were informed that the actors playing the two agents would not only have been through the training themselves but would also ‘have had experience in the field’.¹⁹⁰ Indeed, the two agents would be played by Harry Ree, as Felix, and Jacqueline Nearne, as Cat, both of whom had worked undercover in France. Further filming took place in France with the assistance of members of the French Resistance, as can be seen from a top-secret memo dated the 22nd November 1944 containing the names of contacts in France who could be relied upon to recruit actual members of the French Resistance to be involved in the filming.¹⁹¹ The film’s opening caption, carefully worded by senior officials at SOE headquarters in Baker Street, reflects the film’s twin imperatives of tribute and authenticity:

This is a composite story of actual events. The players are members of French Resistance and the organisation built up in Great Britain to assist resistance in all Occupied Countries. Their sabotage culminated on D-Day in insurrection by thousands of armed patriots which helped to paralyze the enemy’s communications and hastened his defeat.

As well as scenes showing the training of agents – scenes that would serve as a blueprint for many later films – the film follows the two agents as they are parachuted into occupied France where they arm and train members of the French Resistance and lead sabotage missions before being picked up in a light aircraft and returned to England. One historian of the SOE has noted that elements of the film were based on

¹⁸⁸ BFI Library, Teddy Baird Collection (Item 31), memo “Royal Air Force Top Secret Film” (n.d.)

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., memo to commandants of special training schools (19/8/44)

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., memo “Location in South of France” (22/11/44)

actual events and that several procedures were well illustrated: reception committee drills, the use of the S-phone and pick-ups using Lysander aircraft.¹⁹²

The film was first shown on 20 December 1945 to senior officers of the SOE including Sir Colin Gubbins, its executive director between 1943 and 1945, and Maurice Buckmaster, Head of F (French) Section.¹⁹³ In what must have been the film's first written review, Buckmaster congratulated the director on a 'magnificent' film that had captured 'so very faithfully the spirit of the men and women who did this work during the war', describing it as 'a magnificent memorial to chaps who, unlike Felix and Cat, did not come back.'¹⁹⁴ Buckmaster expressed a desire to see the film again on its release and would no doubt have been disappointed that it would be well over a year before he would be able to do so. When the film was finally released, it was in two versions: a longer version for non-theatrical release retaining the original title and a shorter version with the more dramatic-sounding title *School for Danger* prepared for cinema release.¹⁹⁵

Buckmaster's glowing review would suggest that the film's makers had succeeded in their primary task in producing an authentic account of the work of the SOE. In addition, there is evidence that – despite some reservations regarding the acting ability of the two key players and concerns that the subject of special operations had been seen in several films imported from Hollywood – *School for Danger* proved a popular supporting feature enjoyed by family and general audiences.¹⁹⁶

Against the Wind – the story of a group of British agents parachuted into Belgium to rescue a Belgian Resistance leader – also follows the documentary tradition: the story was written by a former member of the SOE; scriptwriter TEB Clarke and producer Michael Balcon spent time in Belgium interviewing former members of the Belgian resistance, some of whose stories had to be rejected because it was thought that

¹⁹² MRD Foot, *SOE in France* (London: HMSO, 1966), p. 77, pp. 83-4, p. 91, p. 171, p. 261.

¹⁹³ Baird, production note

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., letter from Maurice Buckmaster to Teddy Baird (21/12/45)

¹⁹⁵ Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda* (London: IB Taurus, 1998), p. 158.

¹⁹⁶ Baird, assorted press clippings, *Kinematograph Weekly* 18 December 1947, *Kinematograph Weekly* 13 February 1947, *Today's Cinema* 7 February 1947, *Monthly Film Bulletin* March 1947

cinema audiences would find them unbelievable; the unit was assisted and advised by former members of the Belgian Resistance and the SOE, and the actors were put through some, though not all, aspects of SOE training.¹⁹⁷

However, in a radical departure from the conventions of the wartime combat films the director and screenwriter deliberately chose to introduce what they saw as a new type of realism which involved abandoning the 'set and predictable' conventions of the earlier films in which: 'The characters on our side were romanticised, they behaved as the public expected them to behave. Goodies and baddies stayed consistent; no sacrifice was made in vain; the absurd and often tragic mistakes of war were avoided.'¹⁹⁸ Freed from the need to create 'heartening propaganda' the filmmakers set out to show what they considered to be war as it really was.¹⁹⁹ Indeed, as publicity material indicated, this was not a straightforward tale of heroism:

Their widely different lives revolutionised by the war, the six worked together in occupied Belgium with the fear of discovery, and what it would mean, clouding every move they made. They had their successes, their failures, their laughter, their tears. Being human, they were not all heroes, but their nerve-shaking ordeal to which they dedicated themselves brought fresh justification in those dark days to Byron's famous lines: "Yet, Freedom! Yet thy banner torn and flying/Streams like the thunderstorm against the wind."²⁰⁰

This departure from the heroic war film is clear to see. A female agent is sent on what it is revealed will be a suicide mission, and another agent dies when her parachute descent goes wrong. A careless error by one agent costs another his life and although a Belgian agent successfully infiltrates the SS, he dies with his fellow countrymen and a former girlfriend believing him to have been a traitor. In addition, one of the agents is revealed to be a traitor and, in probably the most memorable scene in the film, a female agent – who in the screenplay, although not the final cut, declares she has put aside her femininity for the duration of the war – carries out his summary execution.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁷ Clarke, pp. 157-8., BFI Library, Michael Balcon Collection (G/72), letter to Anne Brusselmaus (5/1/49) Warner, pp. 122-3.

¹⁹⁸ Clarke, p. 157.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ BFI Library, *Against the Wind* small press-book (1947)

²⁰¹ BFI Library, S.4 *Against the Wind* final shooting script (14/3/47)

As British cinema's first combat-orientated war film intended for post-war audiences, the commercial failure of *Against the Wind* merits discussion.²⁰² The film's writer TEB Clarke, reflecting a quarter of a century later, describe it as 'a mistimed film' that would have done well 'if only it had been made five or even ten years later' when British cinema-goers were 'conditioned' to such films, and several critics at the time felt that the film might have done well a few years previously and that war films might enjoy a revival of popularity at some point in the future.²⁰³ However, the general tone of the film is at odds with the idealised heroism of the first half of the 1950s, five years hence, although the character of Ackerman (James Robertson-Justice), the Section Head, anticipates some of the ruthless military leaders to be found during the second half of the 1950s, ten years hence.

The *Daily Mirror's* critic, who foresaw a revival of the popularity of war films, as long as they were neither grim nor harrowing, would no doubt have been surprised that only two years later *Odette*, a war film that is in part both grim and harrowing, should achieve outstanding success at the box-office.²⁰⁴ *Odette* follows the experiences of Odette Hallowes (Anna Neagle), later to become better known as Odette Churchill, as a member of the SOE from her time as a courier in occupied France working for Peter Churchill (Trevor Howard), through her interrogation and torture by the Gestapo and subsequent imprisonment in Ravensbruck concentration camp, to her return to England. *Odette* is the first post-war British war film to feature characters known to the British cinema-going public – Odette and Peter Churchill, who had married after the war, had both been decorated and Jerrard Tickell's novel had introduced their story to a mass audience – something not lost on either Trevor Howard or Anna Neagle who felt the heavy responsibility of portraying national heroes.²⁰⁵ The documentary influence can be seen in the decision of producer-director Herbert Wilcox to take his wife and star along with the scriptwriter to spend time in France in the company of Odette and Peter Churchill who acted as advisors throughout filming and the film's

²⁰² *Kinematograph Weekly* 16 December 1948

²⁰³ Clarke, p. 157., *Monthly Film Bulletin* March 1948, *Observer* 15 February 1948, *Daily Mail* 13 February 1948, *Times* 16 February 1948, *Daily Mirror* 13 February 1948

²⁰⁴ *Daily Mirror* 13 February 1948

²⁰⁵ Michael Nunn, *Trevor Howard: The Man and his Films* (London: Robson Books, 1989), p. 46. Neagle, p. 163.

emphasis on authenticity is further underlined by an appearance from Maurice Buckmaster playing himself in the film and also introducing the audience to key characters at the beginning of the film.²⁰⁶

Unlike *Now It Can Be Told* and *Against the Wind*, the training of agents is not a major feature of the film with more emphasis placed on equipping and co-ordinating the French Resistance. The earlier part of the film, in which Odette collects and passes on plans of the Marseille docks, all the time seeking to evade capture by German Intelligence agents, is essentially an adventure story. However, the mood of the film becomes much darker when, after an approach from a colonel in German Military Intelligence (Marius Goring), Odette and Peter are captured and imprisoned by the Gestapo before Odette is sentenced to death and transferred to Ravensbruck concentration camp where the sentence is to be carried out. In the prison, the cells are dimly lit and the scene in which she is tortured sees her looking exhausted, her dark hair matted with sweat, as he repeats that she has 'nothing to say'. In the scenes in the concentration camp, she is kept in complete darkness and seen only when the cell door is opened either to bring her food or for her to be taunted by one of the guards.

This part of filming had a deep effect on Neagle, with the actress reflecting later on the difficulty she experienced in guarding her own sense of identity:

I lived through the making of the film in a dazed anguish. The atmosphere was so authentic I sometimes felt for the first time that although I was not Odette I was no longer truly myself. The fact that I wore the clothes Odette had worn during her imprisonment helped this illusion of stifling my own personality.²⁰⁷

Indeed, Wilcox would later comment on the strain felt by his wife, declaring that he would never put her through such an experience again after she had come 'near to a complete breakdown'.²⁰⁸ Interestingly, Lewis Gilbert, the director of *Carve Her Name with Pride* (1957), the story of another female SOE agent, Violet Szabo – during which Odette acted as an advisor – would later reflect on the strain the role placed on his

²⁰⁶ Wilcox, pp. 186-7.

²⁰⁷ Neagle, p. 166.

²⁰⁸ Wilcox, p. 183.

own leading actor, Virginia McKenna.²⁰⁹ Significantly, when Odette is seen entering Ravensbruck a group of musicians, all wearing the striped prison uniform, is seen for the first time playing outside a washroom building while a tall chimney bellows out smoke in the background. Interestingly, no comment relating to this reference to the holocaust is made by any character in the film.

Although parts of the film could be described as both grim and harrowing, other parts could be described as uplifting. Odette is portrayed as a courageous woman who has risked her life to serve her country and who has resolutely refused to betray her comrades. She and Peter Churchill survive to be reunited and the film ends with an uplifting message from Odette herself:

It is with a sense of deep humility that I allow my personal story to be told. I am a very ordinary woman to whom a chance was given to see human beings at their best and at their worst. I knew kindness as well as cruelty, understanding as well as brutality. My comrades, who did far more than I and suffered more profoundly, are not here to speak. It is to their memory that this film has been made and I would like it to be a window through which may be seen those very gallant women with whom I had the honour to serve.

The film was one of the outstanding box-office successes of the year and the film's packed houses would appear to have been made up of inclusive audiences: older children and adults, women as well as men, all social classes.²¹⁰ An interesting account of how one audience, that of the film's premiere, reacted to this grim and harrowing but none-the-less inspiring war film can be found in the recollections of its star: 'As the film ended a "thunderous silence" fell over the audience ... then came the deafening applause which seemed to go on even longer than the silence.'²¹¹ Taken at face values such recollection suggest that *Odette* had the effect of moving an audience that was initially unsure as how to respond to such a film. Comments made by several critics suggest that cinema-goers who queued to see the film would be also be moved by it: 'Miss Neagle becomes Odette' who is 'a symbol for all the women who suffered in the

²⁰⁹ Lewis Gilbert, *All My Flashbacks* (London: Reynolds and Hearn, 2010), pp. 181-2.

²¹⁰ *Kinematograph Weekly* 14 December 1950, *Kinematograph Weekly* 8 June 1950, *Monthly Film Bulletin* July 1950

²¹¹ Neagle, pp. 169-70.

war'; the film is a tribute to 'courage and endurance'; audiences would have to be 'very tough indeed' not to shed tears that would be 'tears of pride'.²¹²

Released the same year, *They Were Not Divided* (1950) – the story of the friendship of two volunteers for the Welsh Guards from their basic training to their participation in the D-Day invasion and their deaths in battle as one tries in vain to save his friend – also exhibits many of the features of the documentary tradition. The film's script was written by its director Terence Young who had served with the Guards, filming took place 'almost entirely on location', major roles were played by ex-Servicemen including the legendary Regimental Sergeant-Major Brittain playing himself and using his often-repeated refrain 'I never saw anything like it in my life!', and well-known actors were avoided lest the film 'emphasise personalities rather than people.'²¹³

The film was a major box-office success and might well have been viewed by fairly inclusive audiences: despite its "A" certificate it was deemed suitable for children/adolescents and it was felt that women as well as men would enjoy it.²¹⁴ In view of its popularity, lacklustre reviews – some critics considered its depiction of war to be sanitised, while others felt the inclusion of romance to be inappropriate – might be attributed to high expectations given its status as the first British battle-field war film.²¹⁵ A comment from film-maker and critic Paul Rotha – expressing fears of audiences being 'conditioned into a war mentality' at a time when the world should be fighting a battle against 'famine, disease, illiteracy and ignorance' – is significant as it heralds a concern on the part of some commentators about British cinema-goers' apparent enthusiasm for war films and anticipates by several years Anderson's and Whitebait's seminal essays.²¹⁶ Interestingly, something of a counter-weight to such

²¹² *Sunday Chronicle* 11 June 1950, *Times* 7 June 1950, *Daily Mail* 7 June 1950, *Daily Express* 7 June 1950, *Daily Mirror* 7 June 1950

²¹³ BFI Library, coverage story in *They Were Not Divided* press cuttings file

²¹⁴ *Kinematograph Weekly* 14 December 1950, *Daily Graphic* 31 March 1950, *Kinematograph Weekly* 30 March 1950, *MFB* April/May 1950

²¹⁵ *Evening Standard* 30 March 1950, *Daily Mirror* 31 March 1950, *Tribune* 7 April 1950, *Chronicle* 1 April 1950

²¹⁶ Rotha, 'Into Battle'

views appears in the suggestion from one of the trade papers that exhibitors had a 'solemn duty' to screen this film.²¹⁷

The Wooden Horse (1950) – the story of how three British prisoners-of-war escaped from Stalag Luft III by using a gymnastic vaulting horse to begin their tunnel near to the perimeter fence – completes a trio of combat-oriented war films released in 1950. The greater part of the film takes place inside the camp – although around a third of the film is taken up with the efforts of two of the escapees to make their way through Germany and Denmark to neutral Sweden and the promise of a voyage home – and this part is very much in the documentary tradition. Director Jack Lee and scriptwriter Eric Williams, who had also written the novel, spent three weeks on a 'reconnoitre visit to Germany' in May 1949 looking for suitable prisoner-of-war camps to use for filming before conceding that they would have to build one from scratch.²¹⁸ In addition, diagrams and voice-overs are used to explain how the vaulting horse will be built and used in the escape attempt, the passage of time is indicated by crosses made on a calendar and there are frequent scenes of everyday life in the camp.

While the first section of the film is very much an adventure story, the second part – effectively helmed by producer Ian Dalrymple after the premature departure of Jack Lee who had wanted to end the film with the prisoners' escape – contains several scenes which show a much darker side to the war.²¹⁹ In what is a rare example of a reference in a post-war British war film to the Soviet Union's role in the Second World War, two of the escapees watch in horror as a group of Russian prisoners, half-starved and ill-clothed, is marched past. There are also references to the stresses faced by civilians in German-occupied Denmark and one of the escapees seems visibly shocked after he has killed a German sentry patrolling the dock-side.

²¹⁷ *Kinematograph Weekly* 30 March 1950

²¹⁸ BFI Library, The London Film Productions Collection (Item A/025i) *The Wooden Horse* production notes, Jack Lee interview (Oct 1990) and Bryan Forbes interview (Oct 1989) in Brian McFarlane, *An Autobiography of British Cinema* (London: Methuen, 1997), p. 357., pp. 190-1.

²¹⁹ Lee interview, *Daily Graphic* 28 July 1950

The film was an outstanding box-office success.²²⁰ Significantly, its audiences were likely to include families with younger children than had attended post-war British war films before, as the film had not only been awarded a U certificate but was also considered particularly suitable for children.²²¹ Its appeal to 'both sexes' and 'any audience', along with praise from quality, popular and trade press – the *Observer* declared it 'admirable and exciting', the *Daily Mirror* hailed it as 'a really first-rate thrill' and *Today's Cinema* predicted that the film would be a success because the director had simply retold the men's story without unnecessary embellishment, allowing 'the truth to speak for itself, without the addition of false heroics or romantic trimmings' – suggests a very inclusive audience.²²² The suggestion that one of the film's points of appeal was its 'compelling patriotic angle' again suggests that many cinema-goers did not share Paul Rotha's concerns about war films.²²³

As *Wooden Horse*, *Odette* and *They Were Not Divided* all achieved considerable commercial success, it is perhaps surprising that the following year did not see a wave of combat-oriented war films rather than the few wartime comedies and romances that followed. However, with the outbreak of the Korean War, British troops were once again involved in a major international conflict and there is evidence that this resulted in the abandonment of at least one film. Producer Betty Box's plans to reunite *The Clouded Yellow's* director (Ralph Thomas), writer (Janet Green) and leading actor (Jean Simmons) to respond to the 'vogue for war stories' and make a film about a group of nurses in a military hospital, to be titled "These Were the Valiant", had been abandoned by the end of 1950, amid much acrimony, because in view of the 'Korean situation' Box considered that 'a war film is not a good selling proposition at the moment'.²²⁴ This would prove to be only a temporary postponement of what would indeed turn out to be a wave of combat-oriented war films which, along with various comedies and romances, would keep the Second World War firmly on British cinema screens for the next ten years.

²²⁰ *Kinematograph Weekly* 14 December 1950,

²²¹ *Kinematograph Weekly* 27 July 1950, *Monthly Film Bulletin* September 1950

²²² *Kinematograph Weekly* 27 July 1950, *Today's Cinema* 26 July 1950, *Observer* 30 July 1950, *Daily Mirror* 28 July 1950

²²³ *Kinematograph Weekly* 27 July 1950

²²⁴ BFI Library, Janet Green Collection (JG/48/3) notes regarding "These Were the Valiant" (1/9/1950)

3.3 Adventure Comedies – *Private Angelo*, *Hotel Sahara* and *Appointment with Venus*

Despite its comic, sometimes farcical, tone *Private Angelo* (1949) – the story of a reluctant Italian soldier – contains some profound reflections on the nature of war. As an opening caption indicates, this is not a film about the usual heroes of war: ‘To all conscripted soldiers, past and present, the world over; to all those who never really knew what they were doing; to the baffled, the cowardly, the peace-loving; to the vast majority of us, this picture is affectionately dedicated.’ Angelo (Peter Ustinov) clearly has no particular wish to fight and his girlfriend – who has no time for the usual heroics either: she applauds the cunning of one young man in her village who evaded conscription by faking attacks of epilepsy and contrasts the role of mothers as ‘creators of life’ with that of soldiers as ‘destroyers of life’ – refuses to marry him until the war ends and makes him promise to ‘avoid all contact with the enemy’. In addition, in one scene a group of enthusiastic British commandos looks back nostalgically to the war in North Africa describing it as ‘a good place for war’ because there you ‘couldn’t damage anyone but yourself’ and in another an undercover assassin (James Robertson Justice) concedes that his apparent fearlessness is not a reflection of his heroism but rather evidence that he has lost his sanity. Furthermore, as hostilities end, Angelo comments on the way the war will be remembered: ‘Thus history is made. A different history for each nation, even for each friendly nation. A different prejudice for the schoolroom, a different inscription on the grave’ and at the end of the film he reflects on mankind’s ability to endure adversity while a bell rings with what the script describes as ‘a gentle determination from beyond the centuries ...’ in the background.²²⁵

²²⁵ BFI Library, S.10424 *Private Angelo* first draft script (n.d.)

Although a commercial failure, *Private Angelo* is significant as a film that expresses unease about war and heroism.²²⁶ Publicity material described Angelo as ‘far from the stock heroic type’ and one critic suggested audiences could sympathise with Angelo because ‘every army had its Angelos, and his reactions expressed the feelings all of us felt at some time during the war’ while another considered that the film’s message was ‘war is a bad thing and we should sympathise with those who don’t like it’.²²⁷ The lack of box-office success might be explained in part by its seriousness – ‘a little too subtle for the “ninepennies”’ – but it might also be that the action-shy Angelo was not a hero to attract mass audiences.²²⁸

Hotel Sahara (1951) – the story of a hotel in the North African desert that is occupied in turn by troops from Italy, Britain, Germany, France and, finally, the United States of America – is similarly concerned with soldiers and civilians who would rather be left to get on with their lives, as the opening caption indicates: ‘To all ex-soldiers who, browned off, bothered and occasionally bewildered, served in the conflicting desert armies; and to the unfortunate civilians who got caught in the traffic and had to put up with ‘em, this film is dedicated.’ Indeed, much of the humour in this ‘light-hearted excursion into nostalgia’ derives from the way the, frequently stereotypical, soldiers of all nations are far more exercised by thoughts of food, wine and romance than by the prospect of fighting and in the way the hotel proprietor, Emad (Peter Ustinov), attempts to protect his livelihood at all costs and reluctantly accommodates the successive invaders.²²⁹

Appointment with Venus (1951) – in which British commandos are landed on the German-occupied Channel Islands to prevent a prize-winning cow being taken to Germany – is a light-hearted, and at times comic, adventure-romance. Even so, there was clearly an attempt to ensure the film’s authenticity: a British submarine and motor torpedo boat, along with crew, were supplied by the Royal Navy and a resident of Sark supplied photographs of German soldiers during the occupation to assist the wardrobe

²²⁶ *Kinematograph Weekly* 15 December 1949

²²⁷ *Daily Express* 8 July 1949, *Graphic* 7 July 1949

²²⁸ *Kinematograph Weekly* 10 June 1949

²²⁹ BFI Library, *Hotel Sahara* information folder

department.²³⁰ The film asserts the justness of the Allied cause – one character starts the film with ‘pacifistic views’ and a feeling he is ‘above the world conflict’ but ends it risking his life to save his countrymen – and pays tribute to the people of the Channel Islands, thanked in the film’s credits for their assistance in the making of the film, who are throughout the film portrayed, without exception, as courageous and unbendingly loyal to Britain and the Allied cause.²³¹

Appointment with Venus enjoyed major box-office success and *Hotel Sahara* appears to have made some impact at the box-office.²³² Both films sought to present a less-than-threatening side of the war – ‘a lighter side of war’ and ‘a light-hearted excursion into nostalgia’ – and both would appear to have been viewed by family audiences, being considered suitable for children, and all social classes: ‘all types of audiences’, ‘all classes’, ‘every shade of taste’.²³³ Praise for *Hotel Sahara*’s comedic qualities – ‘a rattling good laugh’, ‘funny enough to tickle the sphinx’ and likely to become ‘one of the comedy hits of the year’ – suggests that some people could see the funny side of war.²³⁴ However, while *Appointment with Venus* was described by one critic as and ‘a light-hearted but also lightweight comedy’, another sounded a more serious note, observing that while the film dealt with ‘the lighter side of war’ it did not ‘make light of the occupation’, suggesting that some audience members might have had their reservations.²³⁵

Conclusion

In addition to explorations of post-war disruption, this period also sees two distinct cycles of films set largely during the war itself: a short-lived and highly imaginative cycle of films in which Allied Military Intelligence only just foils German plans to gain the upper hand and a number of films that seek faithfully to recreate actual, or at the very least realistic, events. It was the documentary-style recreations of actual events –

²³⁰ BFI Library, Betty Box Collection (BEB/13), letters (203/51), (2/4/51)

²³¹ BFI Library S.13888 *Appointment with Venus* post-production script (25/10/1951)

²³² *Kinematograph Weekly* 20 December 1951

²³³ BFI Library, *Appointment with Venus* small press-book (1951), BFI Library *Hotel Sahara* exploitation folder, *Kinematograph Weekly* 5 July 1951, *Today’s Cinema* 2 July 1951, *Kinematograph Weekly* 10 October 1951, *Today’s Cinema* 8 October 1951, *Monthly Film Bulletin* November 1951

²³⁴ *People* 15 July 1951, *Star* 13 July 1951, *Daily Telegraph* 16 July 1951

²³⁵ *Sunday Dispatch* 14 October 1951, *Observer* 14 October 1951

The Overlanders, Odette, They Were Not Divided and *The Wooden Horse* – that proved popular with audiences and, although their success did not lead to an immediate wave of similar films, these films can be seen to establish the mould – authentic accounts that celebrated the bravery of Allied men and women – for a series of films that would prove extremely popular with audiences over the next few years.

Part 1 Conclusion

Some writers have suggested that the Second World War disappeared from British cinema screens for several years after the end of hostilities.²³⁶ However, the inclusion of war-related films, some of them set entirely after the end of hostilities, along with combat-oriented war films establishes the period 1946 to 1951 as a particularly significant one with regard to representations of the Second World War on British cinema screens with over 30 films released during these years in which the war plays a major part.

In terms of the content of these films, they can be seen to project an underlying sense of unease, anxiety and even fear, with a number of key themes apparent not just in individual films, but also in cycles of films. Anxieties about whether couples can re-establish their relationships after years separated by war are explored early in the post-war period (*Captive Heart*, *Years Between* and *Piccadilly Incident*) while concerns that physical injury might have a long-term effect on relationships feature in films released several years later (*Small Voice*, *Small Back Room* and *Woman with No Name*). Fears that returning servicemen might experience difficulty in adjusting to peacetime Britain and even find themselves tempted into a life of crime are likewise explored (*Fugitive*, *Dancing with Crime*, *Flamingo*, *Noose* and *Night Beat*) along with concerns about the fate of men damaged psychologically by war (*Executioner* and *Clouded Yellow*). British cinema at this time also expresses a fear that the hard-won peace might indeed prove fragile (*Frieda*, *Portrait from Life* and *Lost People*) and that ghosts from the wartime past might return (*Silent Dust*, *Cage of Gold* and *Circle of Danger*). This sense of anxiety can be seen also in a brief resurgence of the espionage film where the Allied war effort comes close to being undermined (*Night Boat*, *Stranger*, *Lisbon Story*, *Eyes That Kill* and *Castle Sinister*). It can be seen too in the darkness of some of the early examples of the combat-oriented war film (*Against the Wind* and *Odette*) – and, indeed, in comedy and romance (*Private Angelo* and *The Hasty Heart*). However, the content of several films released towards the end of this

²³⁶ Manvell, p. 232., p. 236., Boyce, p. 3.

period such as the combat-oriented *Wooden Horse* and *They Were Not Divided* and comedies such as *Hotel Sahara* and *Appointment with Venus* suggest that the general tone of films featuring the Second World War was beginning to move in a different direction.

Although Armes most likely had in mind combat-oriented war films when he wrote that the war to which these films look back is 'a peculiarly British one, devoid of concentration camps and senseless violence', there is evidence in several of the films of this period of clear and specific references to the 'horror' of war that he asserts these films ignore.²³⁷ Both *Portrait from Life* and *Odette* contain specific references to the holocaust while *Portrait from Life* and *Lost People* are centrally concerned with the plight of the displaced peoples of Europe. In addition, *Wooden Horse* contains a brief scene later in the film in which the physical condition of Russian prisoners of war contrasts with that of the Allied prisoners seen earlier during exercise classes.

It is significant that, in keeping with the thematic darkness of war and war-related films of this time, the majority of such films carry an "A" rather than a "U" certificate. Although many of the "A"-rated films were deemed suitable for adolescents and children, the small proportion of "U"-certificate films suggests that at this time films in which the Second World War appears were made with adult audiences primarily in mind. It is significant too that as the mood of anxiety surrounding the war began to fade so too would the dominance of the "A" certificate.

When considering the box-office performance of these films, certain patterns appear to emerge. Films concerned with the problems facing couples separated by war (*Captive Heart*, *Years Between* and *Piccadilly Incident*) proved popular with audiences while those concerned with problems caused by men's feelings of emasculation owing to war injury (*Small Voice*, *Small Back Room* and *Woman with No Name*) did not. A film that dealt with post-war reconciliation from the perspective of an English village (*Frieda*) had cinema-goers queuing whereas two films featuring the plight of displaced

²³⁷ Armes, p. 177.

persons on mainland Europe (*Portrait from Life* and *Lost People*) failed to do so. Audiences appear to have been enthusiastic about films about returning servicemen and the criminal underworld (*Fugitive*, *Noose*, *Dancing with Crime*), less interested in films concerning servicemen whose return is marred by psychological damage (*Executioner*) and completely uninterested in a film that deals sympathetically with a deserter (*Man on the Run*). Combat-oriented films proved popular (*Wooden Horse*, *Odette*, *They Were Not Divided*, *School for Danger*) except for one that deliberately sought to challenge the conventions relating to heroism (*Against the Wind*), and audiences seem to have enjoyed the funny side of war as long as the film was light-hearted (*Appointment with Venus*, *Hotel Sahara*) rather than too serious (*Private Angelo*).

Although a note of caution must be sounded when drawing conclusions based on box-office data, several tentative conclusions can be drawn from estimations of success and failure at the box-office during this period. Cinema-goers certainly appear to have been keen to see films that showed the British people as determined, dutiful and courageous, whether they were facing the challenges of war (*Wooden Horse*, *Odette*, *They Were Not Divided* and *School for Danger*) or post-war society (*The Captive Heart*, *The Years Between*, *Frieda*). Furthermore, it would seem that cinema-goers were none too keen on films that projected a less heroic image of the British people, either making careless mistakes amidst the chaos of war (*Against the Wind*), abandoning their comrades or otherwise seeking to avoid contact with the enemy (*Man on the Run* and *Private Angelo*) or becoming embittered and self-pitying when faced with physical injury (*Small Voice*, *Small Back Room* and *Woman with No Name*). In addition, cinema-goers appear to have been unenthusiastic about films concerned with the plight of the peoples of mainland Europe (*Portrait from Life* and *Lost People*) and to have been much keener on films that had a greater element of authenticity to them (*The Overlanders*, *They Were Not Divided* and *The Wooden Horse*) than those based on more imaginative storylines (*Night Boat to Dublin* and *I See a Dark Stranger*).

As regards the question of whether audiences were engaging with representations of the Second World War as a source of anxiety, there is specific contemporaneous evidence that they were indeed doing so. Reviewers of *The Years Between* clearly felt that there would be couples sat in cinemas, perhaps glancing awkwardly at each other, recognising their own difficulties following years of wartime separation being projected onto the screen. Furthermore, reading reviews of *Frieda* it is easy to imagine, once the curtains had closed and the lights had come up, arguments breaking out – as the producers clearly hoped – among members of the audience, possibly carrying on for some time, about whether or not they would have welcomed Frieda Mansfeld into their home. In addition, although it would be easy to dismiss the critical hostility towards *Fugitive* and *Noose* as the predictable response of the quality press, Arthur Vessollo's comments in particular appear to articulate a view that such depictions of a post-war Britain bereft of its sense of right and wrong were accurate as well as frightening. Given that this hostility came from the popular as well as the quality press, it would appear that, like the censors, audiences for these films – widely acknowledged as topical – recognised the events on screen as accurate representations of post-war Britain.

Part Two – A Time of Tribute: Constructing a Wartime Narrative, 1952-1955

Introduction

As has been seen, for six years after the end of hostilities the Second World War appeared on British cinema screens, mainly in war-related films rather than combat-oriented war films, featuring largely as a source of disruption. In contrast, from the early years of the 1950s to the end of the decade the Second World War appears mainly in the form of combat-oriented war films. Indeed, combat-oriented war films would become arguably the dominant genre of British cinema during the 1950s in terms not only of the number of films released and their commercial and often critical success but also their involvement of the country's leading producers, directors and actors.

However, it would be a mistake to assume, as many writers seem to have done, that British combat-oriented war films from the 1950s form a largely homogenous group.²³⁸ Indeed, to do so would risk missing the significance of a clear change in the nature of these films that can be seen as early as 1956. Not only does dividing the analysis of war and war-related films released during the decade into two distinct parts make clear the changing nature of the representations of the Second World War on British cinema screens, and therefore help to contest assumptions of homogeneity, but it also makes possible an informed contextualisation of the other main charges levelled against these films: that they provide a nostalgic escapism from contemporary problems and that they ignore the suffering caused by war. As these charges can be seen to date back to an essay written by Lindsay Anderson, published in 1957, it merits reproduction in part:

You can make a film like *All Quiet on the Western Front*, which is an outcry against the whole abomination. Our war films are not like that. Or, like the Poles in the last few years, you can keep returning to the War because you are obsessed by it; because it crystallised a conflict, an essential aspiration; because it evokes ghosts that have to be exorcised. But when the Poles showed *Kanal* at Cannes, they prefaced it with an announcement. 'This film,' they said 'is not made as an exciting

²³⁸ Durnat pp. 83-4., Manvell pp. 309-21., Jeavons, p. 188

entertainment. It is made as a reminder of what occurred, and as a warning, that such things should not be allowed to happen again.' We do not make war films like this either. These stories continue to be made in Britain firstly because they are profitable. Secondly, because the world of the services is one which perpetuates the traditional social set-up of the country, its distinctions of class and privilege. And thirdly, because by escaping into war, we can evade the complex uncertainties of the present and the challenge of the future. Back there, chasing the *Graf Spee* again in the *Battle of the River Plate*, tapping our feet to the March of *The Dam Busters*, we can make believe that our issues are simple ones – it's *Great Britain* again!²³⁹

First, Anderson's reference to imagining that Britain is 'Great' once more can be traced through writers such as Jeavons, Armes and Havardi who dismiss the 1950s British war film as a reaction to contemporary social change and to Britain's declining international power in the form of a nostalgic remembering of Britain's former glories, describing them as a 'nostalgic looking back to a time in the recent past when issues were clear-cut and Britain's greatness, though under threat, was self-evident and confirmed by victory', as 'archaic memories of a self-deluding era's retreat into a cosy never-never land' and as evidence of a 'nostalgic overdrive'.²⁴⁰ Second, Anderson's complaint that British post-war Second World War films contain nothing to warn cinema audiences about the horrors of war is echoed in Armes's later assertion that: '[T]he war to which these films look back is a peculiarly British one, devoid of concentration camps and senseless violence ... These films underplay the horrors of combat ... War is not a savage unknown but a kind of ultra-serious chess game, in which the enemy can be outmanoeuvred by superior intelligence.'²⁴¹ Third, his assertion that 1950s British war films were reactionary has been pursued in particular by Rattigan who argues that they were an attempt to restore middle-class hegemony by rewriting the "People's war" narrative in favour of the middle classes.²⁴²

There is substance to the assertion that wounded national pride might be soothed by reminders of past glories and there can be little doubt that the focus of post-war

²³⁹ Anderson, p. 236-7.

²⁴⁰ Jeavons, p. 188. Armes, p. 179. Havardi, p. 129.

²⁴¹ Armes, pp. 177-8.

²⁴² Rattigan, 'The Last Gasp of the Middle Class', pp. 143-53.

British war films on officers rather than the other ranks can be seen as a privileging of the middle classes. However, in order to appreciate these films fully it is necessary for them to be viewed not only as a reaction to social change and declining national prestige, or as an attempt to reassert the hegemony of the middle classes, but also in terms of the British people coming to terms with the experience of living through six years of total war by constructing a cinematic narrative of how the British people had fought and survived the Second World War. The way in which films pay tribute to the British at war will be the subject of Chapter 4. Although Arnes does not assert explicitly that these films are pro-war, neither he nor other writers of the time trouble themselves much in defending them from such accusations, hence the apparent surprise with which both Medhurst and Sargeant conclude, from their own surveys, that they can find no evidence of a glorification of war: asserting that they are not 'unthinkingly jingoistic' and that they go beyond 'partisan heroics'.²⁴³ A consideration of whether and to what extent war films of the early 1950s 'underplay the horrors of combat' will be the subject of Chapter 5. Finally, although war-related films are in the minority in the early 1950s, as they would be for the remainder of the decade, several of them are significant, revisiting the theme of returning Servicemen and further exploring the impact of the war on civilians. These films will be the subject of Chapter 6.

²⁴³ Medhurst, p. 36. Sargeant, p. 208.

Chapter 4 – A Nation of Heroes

Stories of wartime heroism proved extremely popular in Britain in the years following the war and estimates that around four million people had read “The Cruel Sea” certainly encouraged Michael Balcon to acquire the novel’s film rights.²⁴⁴ A recent study of post-war Europe locates the popularity of war stories in Britain in the late 1940s and early 1950s within a continent-wide ‘cult of heroism’ in which nations sought to rebuild their sense of national identity and confidence through stories of wartime heroism and asserts that the British people, exhausted by war and fearful of the struggles ahead, sought comfort in stories that cast them as ‘a nation of heroes’:

As an antidote to the tales of horror from abroad, and the tales of misery at home, the British turned out stories of heroism by the score. The end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s saw a veritable avalanche of British war stories – *The Great Escape*, *The Cruel Sea*, *The Dam Busters*, *Ill Met by Moonlight*, *The Colditz Story*, *Reach for the Sky*, to name but a handful of the most famous accounts. None of the protagonists in these stories ever express any doubts about the justness of their cause, their abilities, or the belief that they would succeed despite the seemingly insuperable obstacles before them. This was not merely the recycling of wartime propaganda – this was how the British *needed* to see themselves in the years after the war.²⁴⁵

Such comments accord with those of Bryan Forbes, a principal contributor to British war films in the 1950s as both writer and actor, when asked to account for the popularity of these films:

I think it was inevitable. The war was so long and so hard and we suffered for years of nothing but reverses, that I think it was only natural afterwards to say, as it were, ‘Listen, we’ve won you know’ ... I think it’s not unnatural that people want to pat themselves on the back when they’ve come through a long war, which in the UK involved all the civilians, don’t forget. People just wanted to say, ‘Jesus, we came through it.’²⁴⁶

²⁴⁴ Ramsden, ‘Refocusing “The People’s War”’, pp. 36-7., Balcon, p. 178.

²⁴⁵ Keith Lowe, *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II* (London: Penguin, 2013), pp. 61-2.

²⁴⁶ Forbes interview

Viewing British Second World War films as part of a process of a nation coming to terms with its recent experiences of war by creating cinematic tales of heroism is particularly illuminating as it casts light on the qualities that British audiences saw as required by wartime heroes and the idealised characters that were created can be seen as representations of the way the British people wanted to remember themselves at war. As this construction of heroism takes place within a body of films clearly intended as respectful tributes to those who had fought in the war, it is instructive to first outline the mechanisms by which this is achieved.

4.1 Establishing War Films as Tributes

First, the element of tribute is often made explicit in opening or closing captions that carry a dedication to the service personnel whose story is told in the film. For example, *Appointment in London* (1952) is dedicated to 'all those airmen who were unable to keep an appointment in London', *Gift Horse* (1952) is 'respectfully dedicated' to the crews of the destroyers gifted to the Royal Navy by the US Navy in 1940, and one of Winston Churchill's most memorable speeches is recalled in the opening caption of *Angels One Five* (1952): '... Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will say ... "This was their finest hour." Winston Churchill 1940.'

Second, films invariably include an acknowledgement of the assistance provided by one or more branches of the Services. It has been pointed out that many films simply could not have been made without such assistance and that this gave the Services influence over the films' content.²⁴⁷ However, these acknowledgements act also as a seal of approval, an assurance that the relevant branches of the Services and veterans' associations are satisfied that the memory of those who had served in the war has been treated with respect. For example, the opening captions of *Above Us the Waves* (1955) acknowledge the assistance of the Admiralty and those of *Gift Horse*

²⁴⁷ Ramsden, 'Refocusing "The People's War"', p. 51.; MacKenzie, *British War films 1939-1945*, p. 132.

acknowledge the help of a veterans' group, the St. Nazaire society, as well as that given by the Royal Navy and the United States Navy. The importance of actively seeking the approval of those who took part in the events depicted in order to reassure audiences as to the sincerity of the film-makers' intentions can be seen most clearly in the opening captions of *The Dam Busters*, a film in which, significantly, many of the main characters were based upon actual people who had been involved in the raids. After acknowledging the assistance of the Royal Air Force, the producers reassure audiences that: 'They also wish to record their appreciation of the approval willingly given to the telling of this story by all those represented in it and by the next of kin of the many members of 617 Squadron who, from this or later operations, did not return.'

Third, factual accuracy was clearly regarded as essential if a film was to be seen as a suitably respectful tribute and it has been argued that it would have been regarded as sacrilegious for film-makers to depart from the truth.²⁴⁸ *Above Us the Waves* begins, for example, with actuality footage of Atlantic convoys, *Appointment in London* with scenes that self-consciously recall the documentary realism of *Target for Tonight* (1941), and *The Sea Shall Not Have Them* (1954) with a voiced-over introduction by a former station commander: 'My name is Group Captain Todd. During the war I commanded an R.A.F. station on the east coast of England. This is the story of some of the men of the air-sea rescue service who served under my command. They didn't fly but went to sea in high-speed launches. Their job, to rescue their comrades from the sea – their motto "The Sea Shall Not Have Them"'.

At the same time, however, film-makers were well aware that some deviation from the truth was required if they were to tell stories that would entertain audiences and it is interesting to note instances of their seeking to reassure audiences that they had not deviated too far from the truth. *The Red Beret* (1953), for example, begins with a rather ambiguous statement about the difficulty of retelling stories where fact is often

²⁴⁸ Chapman, 'Our Finest Hour Revisited', p. 69.

stranger than fiction, and a clear indication of the need to strike a balance between veracity and entertainment can be found in a slightly longer version of the opening credits of *The Colditz Story* (1955):

Every incident related in the film is factual. With the exception of the author all names have been changed. It has been necessary, in order to make a storyline, to create composite characters. Factual events have been attributed in some cases to imaginary characters and a few incidents have been simplified or are related out of their historical context. These – and only these – liberties have been taken with “The Colditz Story”.²⁴⁹

Fourth, the need to establish authenticity also helps to explain the continued adoption of the very techniques of film-making that audiences most closely associated with authenticity, those of the documentary tradition. Although the stilted dialogue associated with the employment of non-professional actors has largely disappeared by the early 1950s and the dialogue-free scenes of training and routine activity are rarer, these films retain something of the visual style of wartime films – many of the directors having been schooled during the “wartime wedding” of documentary and studio traditions – and the influence of the documentary tradition is ever-present in terms of following military procedure and the use of authentic equipment. It has been argued that British documentary movement went into decline after the Second World War before re-emerging in Free Cinema and the social realism of the British New Wave of the late 1950s and early 1960s.²⁵⁰ However, it can certainly be said that the critically neglected war films of the 1950s kept alive many aspects of the documentary tradition in the interim period.²⁵¹

Finally, the requirement to produce films that would be viewed as respectful tributes helps to explain the widespread use of stories with which the public was already familiar and which had already been deemed to be acceptable. Memoirs such as Pat Reid’s “The Colditz Story”, dramatized accounts of actual events such as Paul Brickhill’s

²⁴⁹ BFI Library, Film Programmes Collection, *The Colditz Story* Film Premiere Programme (1955)

²⁵⁰ Sussex, pp ix-vii

²⁵¹ Chapman, ‘Our finest Hour Revisited’, p. 65.

“The Dam Busters” and fictional but realistic stories based on typical rather than specific events such as Nicholas Monsarrat’s “The Cruel Sea” provided the inspiration for many of the most popular war films of the early 1950s.

4.2 Gentle Knights, Officers and Gentlemen – *Angels One Five*, *Gift Horse*, *The Cruel Sea*, *Albert RN*, *The Colditz Story*, *The Dam Busters*, *Above Us the Waves*

In *Angels One Five* a young pilot is described by a colleague as a ‘gentle knight’ and publicity material for *Above Us the Waves* asserts that its central character, played by John Mills, is of a similar type: ‘In *Above Us the Waves* John Mills returns to the type of role which he has made peculiarly his own – that of the quiet resolute British serviceman, the living embodiment of that much abused phrase, officer and gentleman.’²⁵² This gentle knight/officer-and-gentleman figure is clearly an incarnation of the chivalric hero – associated with qualities of courage, loyalty, honour, honesty and kindness – popular in literature – for example, Chaucer’s *A Knight’s Tale*, to which the term ‘gentle knight’ is a direct reference, Mallory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* and Scott’s *Ivanhoe* – as well as film. Richards – who has argued that, with a number of swashbuckling epics released during the decade, the 1950s was the ‘last great age of cinematic chivalry’ – sees characters such as Ericson in *Cruel Sea* as ‘maintaining the code of officers and gentlemen’ and a continuation of the imperial archetype seen in films such as *The Four Feathers*.²⁵³ Likewise Spicer, in his study of depictions of masculinity in British cinema, views characters such as Ericson as direct descendants of the ‘debonair gentlemen’ whose hegemony had been achieved largely through the imperial adventure narrative.²⁵⁴ However, for Spicer such characters – termed ‘meritocratic professional officers’ – have been imbued with some of the characteristics of the ‘ordinary man as hero’ – including a certain toughness and resourcefulness – that make them, unlike their more debonair predecessors, equal to

²⁵² BFI Library, Film Programmes Collection, *Above Us the Waves* Film Premier Programme (1955)

²⁵³ Richards, *Film and British National Identity*, p. 170; Richards, *Visions of Yesterday*, p. 86.

²⁵⁴ Spicer, *Typical Men*, pp. 33-39.

the 'rigours of modern warfare'.²⁵⁵ Indeed, it will be argued that this updated gentle knight might well have been seen as less of a symbol of the middle-classes than some writers have assumed.

In a group of films from the early 1950s – *Angels One Five*, *Gift Horse*, *Cruel Sea*, *Albert RN* (1953), *Colditz Story*, *Dam Busters* and *Above Us the Waves* – the central characters demonstrate, in the context of modern warfare, qualities of the chivalric hero that establish their suitability as military leaders: a devotion to duty and the men under their command; a belief in the efficacy of military procedure and discipline and a concomitant rejection of individual heroics; the ability to stay calm in a crisis and lead their subordinates effectively; a feeling of personal responsibility for the lives of those affected by their decisions and a determination to lead from the front. All of these qualities are displayed, to a certain degree, by the key characters in these films and, as will be seen, can be illustrated clearly by one or two particular examples.

I. A devotion to duty and those they command

Although the climax of *Gift Horse* sees Commander Fraser (Trevor Howard) leading a destroyer filled with explosives and carrying a team of commandos during the raid on the St. Nazaire docks, Fraser's heroism is established long before this point, not by his military prowess, which for much of the film is questioned, but for the way his devotion to duty and the men under his command never wavers despite his enduring a series of personal and professional setbacks. Fraser, a former naval officer who has been "dug out" of an enforced retirement after an incident that cost him his naval career to captain an ancient destroyer gifted by the American navy, works tirelessly to mould his crew into an efficient fighting force with a combination of procedure and discipline. Unfortunately, he is beset by a number of mishaps and misjudgements – the failure to prevent the sinking of a merchant ship, a canon jamming when a U-boat had

²⁵⁵ Ibid

been spotted on the surface and the ship becoming entangled in anti-submarine defences – that casts serious doubt on his suitability for leadership.

However, his qualities as a leader are revealed by the way he copes with such adversity, demonstrating great tenacity in his determination to finish the job and showing great devotion to his crew, proving himself ‘compassionate as well as stern’ and demonstrating a sympathy for his men which might well have been learned from his own ‘tragedy-filled life’.²⁵⁶ He takes the blame for an error by a junior officer, accepts the challenge of a drinking contest with a pub landlord to ensure that members of his crew avoid criminal prosecution, makes special arrangements for a troublesome rating to visit his sick mother and imposes no punishment on a rating who had deserted following the death of his wife and child. Fraser’s devotion to duty and to his crew wins him their respect and loyalty, shown by their defence of him against another crew’s criticism and their willingness to volunteer for hazardous duties.

There can be no doubting the devotion to duty and those under his command of Squadron Leader Guy Gibson (Richard Todd) in *Dam Busters*. On returning from what he expects to be his last mission for some time, Gibson is asked to begin another tour of duty: leading a special mission the details of which he cannot be told at this point. He immediately accepts and, on hearing the news, his entire crew abandons all plans of taking their eagerly-anticipated leave to remain with him. Gibson demonstrates a boyish enthusiasm for the mission and is tireless in seeking to ensure its success: even off duty his mind is on the mission with theatre lighting offering a solution to the problem of calculating the height of low-flying planes. He is a natural leader, often addressed simply as ‘Leader’, and followed without question.

²⁵⁶ MacKenzie, *British War Films 1939-1945*, p. 139.; Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, p. 221.

There is just one occasion where Gibson is involved in the more mundane aspects of leadership such as being called on to give counsel to members of the squadron. Having been informed that members of his squadron are tiring of accusations from other squadrons that they are having an easy time, Gibson gives the nod to his crews to let off steam the next time this happens. The scene of riotous behaviour in the mess which follows, like similar scenes in *Angels* and *Appointment in London* in which the commanding officers take a leading part, are clearly coded references to heavy drinking and it is significant that here Gibson is only peripherally involved. Although Richard Todd had spent time with people who had known Gibson intimately to ensure that his portrayal of him was 'as accurate as possible', the actor, who was around ten years older at the time of filming than Gibson had been at the time of the events depicted, portrays Gibson as a calm, mature and sober figure who is quite unlike the young man whose memoir recounts his state of nervous exhaustion and frequent bouts of heavy drinking.²⁵⁷ It is ironic that in *Dam Busters*, arguably the most faithful recreation of any actual wartime event, the cinematic Gibson bears little resemblance to his real-life counterpart and suggests strongly that cinema audiences wanted to see idealised depictions of their wartime heroes.

II: Procedure and discipline rather than individual heroics

In this group of films leaders are essentially team-builders who have little time for individual heroics. As Group-Captain "Tiger" Small (Jack Hawkins), the station commander in *Angels*, makes clear: 'Discipline and procedure are just as important as courage and skill. Every man and woman on this station has a part to play and a strict set of rules to play by.' Small epitomises gentlemanly conduct and a firm-but-fair, paternalistic approach to leadership, at one point describing himself as father to the base's several thousand inhabitants. Although he is a firm disciplinarian it is significant that he considers himself bound by the same rules as everyone else. Early in the film this 'stern but benevolent station commander' praises a sentry for following procedure and refusing him entry to a building until he produces his papers, even though the

²⁵⁷ Richard Todd, *In Camera: An Autobiography Continued* (London: Hutchinson, 1989), p. 67. Guy Gibson, *Enemy Coast Ahead* (London: Morley-Baker, 1969)

sentry knows perfectly well who he is.²⁵⁸ In addition, following an incident where he seizes a machine gun and starts firing at enemy aircraft during an attack on the station, Small, rather than congratulating himself for his bravery, admonishes himself for what he concludes was in fact an act of indiscipline that was all the more inexcusable because he as station commander should have set an example to everyone else.

As well as the creation of characters like Small, Fraser and Gibson who are team-builders, British cinema – in the form of the two commando-mission films of this period: *They Who Dare* (1954) and *Cockleshell Heroes* (1955) – cautions against the more extreme forms of individual heroism. Although there can be no doubting the courage of Lieutenant Graham (Dirk Bogarde) in *They Who Dare*, the story of a commando raid on airfields on the German-held island of Rhodes, his recklessness endangers the mission and the lives of his team. Graham's taste for action far exceeds Gibson's boyish enthusiasm, and it is significant that a colleague who relaxes by sketching portraits draws Graham as a buccaneer. On two occasions Graham, who by his own admission enjoys the thrill of combat, acts recklessly: ordering troops to travel light and carry only one water bottle and attaching one last bomb on a plane which is located too close to a German sentry post. On both occasions this recklessness endangers the mission: the search for additional water takes the group close to a German-occupied village and Graham's attempt to place the bomb results in the Germans being alerted before the commandos are clear of the airfield, leading to most of the group being captured or killed before the mission is complete. Disapproval of Graham's approach to leadership is communicated by the character of Sergeant Corcoran (Denholm Elliott), an explosives expert who is, despite his inferior rank, Graham's intellectual and social equal and who provides an on-going, although occasionally hysterical, commentary on Graham's shortcomings.

In *Cockleshell Heroes*, a similar buccaneering approach to leadership is displayed by Major Stringer (Jose Ferrer), the leader of an audacious plan to destroy merchant ships

²⁵⁸ Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, p. 218.

supplying German factories by paddling canoes up-river to Bordeaux. Stringer is a self-confessed adventurer who at one point tells his second-in-command: 'You see I'm only playing at being a marine. Actually, I joined up in a fit of boyish enthusiasm and now they've been rash enough to make me an Acting Major, and put me in charge of this unit.' However, Stringer's buccaneering approach lands him in trouble from the start: his attempt to arrive at the marine base by paddling up-river past security checks finds him arrested by a patrol for canoeing in a restricted area, and his assumption that the men under his command are like-minded individualists results in two disastrous practice operations. Unlike Graham, Stringer admits that his buccaneering approach has failed and turns for advice to his second in command, Captain Thompson (Trevor Howard), a regular officer bitter that his career has been effectively ended but who retains an undying faith in the efficacy of military discipline. Having previously provided a critical commentary on his commanding officer's failings, Thompson is now ready with a tried-and-tested approach: 'You take this sloppy lot and whip them into a team. You pitch into them until they learn to do exactly as they are told, whether they like it or not.' That Stringer has finally learned the importance of military procedure is confirmed when, following the death of one of the marines, Thompson pleads successfully with Stringer to allow him to replace the dead man on the mission. Stringer's redemption is confirmed when the mission ends as a qualified success.

In *Above Us the Waves*, an account of the attempt to use midget submarines to sink the Tirpitz, the film's central character, Commander Fraser (John Mills), epitomises a spirit of adventure that is tempered with a belief in procedure and discipline and a concern for the lives of the men under his command. His sense of adventure can be seen in the way he challenges the Admiral's dismissal of the efficacy of underwater chariots, or manned torpedoes, by staging a demonstration in which dummy mines are attached to the hull of the Admiral's flagship. Interestingly, the Admiralty's response to this apparent act of insubordination, the decision to mount an attack on the Tirpitz using these weapons, suggests an acknowledgement of a place for initiative and risk-taking. However, despite this act, Fraser is essentially a conformist who instils into his men the importance of conventional discipline – reprimanding a junior officer for

wearing a non-issue pullover by reminding him that he is not a fighter pilot – teamwork and training, the importance of which is reinforced by extensive scenes of training, filmed in a documentary style.²⁵⁹ He also shows concern for the safety of those under his command, admonishing one crew member for a reckless act that had risked the life of a comrade who had a wife and children to support. In addition, Fraser's humility is revealed when he suggests to a young rating who has confessed to being afraid during a rehearsal raid that he himself was 'scared stiff' during trials of the underwater chariots, telling him: 'There are two types of courage aren't there? One fellow's brave because he doesn't know what fear is. The other fellow's brave because he is afraid, and fights it and doesn't show it.'

III: Maintaining discipline and morale in a crisis

Examples of calm and measured leadership can be found in the two prisoner-of-war films from this period – *Albert* and *Colditz Story* – where much of the focus is, not surprisingly, on the various escape attempts and heroic status is generally conferred on those prisoners who are entirely committed to escaping.²⁶⁰ However, in this sub-genre of war films that has attracted most hostility for its depiction of war as little more than a series of "Boys Own"-style adventure stories, there is a key role which falls on the shoulders of the Senior British Officer (SBO) who is not usually directly involved in the escape: maintaining discipline and morale in circumstances that require a careful balancing act between well-planned escape attempts that can raise the men's morale, giving them both purpose and hope, and rash escape attempts that will likely end in failure, possibly in death, and are likely to lead to despair.²⁶¹

In *Albert* – based on the experiences of scriptwriter Guy Morgan who as a prisoner-of-war had witnessed the use of a dummy to fool camp guards during head counts – the Senior British Officer, Captain Maddox (Jack Warner), struggles gamely to tread this

²⁵⁹ Donald Sinden, *A Touch of the Memoirs* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982), pp. 201-10.

²⁶⁰ Gerahty, p. 183.

²⁶¹ Medhurst, p. 35.

precarious line between encouraging morale-boosting escape attempts and preventing reckless attempts which, like that attempted by “Tex” Norton (William Sylvester), end in the death of the would-be escaper.²⁶² In *Colditz Story*, concerned with attempts to escape from the supposedly escape-proof camp for persistent would-be escapers, this balancing act involves some very tough decisions. Based on the memoirs of Pat Reid, the first British Escape Officer at the camp, Reid (John Mills) is always on the lookout for a way to escape – curious as to where drains might lead and seizing the opportunity presented by a clear out of old mattresses – and, like Gibson in *Dam Busters*, is full of boyish enthusiasm, rather than, like Graham in *They Who Dare*, essentially reckless. However, Reid’s judgement appears to desert him when a combination of enthusiasm for escape and loyalty to a friend blind him to a flaw in an escape plan. On this occasion, Reid’s rashness is checked by the SBO, Colonel Richmond (Eric Portman). Richmond is clearly aware of the importance of successful escape attempts in maintaining the morale of the men, and even initiates an early escape attempt, yet he is only too aware of the danger of men being killed in failed escape attempts. The difficulty of his struggle to ensure the well-being and safety of the men under his command is seen clearly when he persuades “Mac” McGill (Christopher Rhodes) to stand down from an escape attempt that he had originated because his height would attract the attention of the guards, only for McGill to react by staging a reckless solo escape attempt in which he is killed. The following day Richmond explains to Reid his reasons for persuading McGill to stand down and when Reid argues that the other escapers were willing to take the risk because it was Mac’s idea, Richmond responds angrily:

I wasn’t though, you muddled-headed idiot. Why can’t you understand? I’m not an individual like you, free to act according to my own desires, I’m Senior British Officer. I wish I wasn’t but I am. As such, my unfortunate responsibility is to see that British officers in here don’t act like fools and lose their lives by doing so. By taking Mac with you, you might have lost half-a-dozen lives not one.

Richmond seeks to channel the energies of his subordinates towards escape attempts that have the greatest chance of success, introducing escape committees and liaison

²⁶² BFI Library, *Albert RN* small press-book (1953)

between the different national groups. As such, the appointment of Reid as Escape Officer is, to use the analogy of the boarding school often applied to prisoner-of-war films, like a headmaster appointing a potentially troublesome pupil as prefect. Furthermore, in a nuanced performance from Portman that has received less credit than it deserves, Richmond demonstrates a refusal to accept defeat by maintaining a defiance in his dealings with the Germans which is clothed in civility.

IV: Taking responsibility for the lives of others and leading from the front

In *Cruel Sea*, a story of Royal Navy destroyers protecting Atlantic and Baltic convoys, the film's central character Commander Ericson (Jack Hawkins) reveals a heartfelt sense of responsibility for the lives of those affected by his decisions. Having ordered the release of depth-charges in an area where he believed there was a German submarine that resulted in the deaths of a number of shipwrecked sailors and the accusation from one of the crew that he is a 'bloody murderer', Ericson seeks comfort in alcohol. His response to the efforts of his second-in-command, Lieutenant Lockhart (Donald Sinden), who had identified the submarine that it was he, Lockhart, who was responsible for their murder, is to reply with tears running down his cheek: 'No-one murdered them. It's the war, the whole bloody war. We've got to do these things and say our prayers at the end.' The decision to show a British commanding officer shedding tears was not taken lightly and the scene was filmed three times, each time Hawkins delivering the lines with varying degrees of tearfulness.²⁶³

The strain of leading others on dangerous missions also features prominently in *Appointment in London*, the story of a bomber squadron led by Wing-Commander Tim Mason (Dirk Bogarde), believed to be based on the character of Guy Gibson.²⁶⁴ The film's script includes a character sketch of Mason that illustrates his particular brand of courage, emphasising his battle to overcome the intense pressure he is under:

²⁶³ Jack Hawkins, *Anything for a Quiet Life*, (London: Coronet, 1975), pp. 136-7.

²⁶⁴ Mackenzie, *British War Films 1939-1945*, p. 152.

Tim Mason is young, but looks older than his years. He is a natural leader of men, but leading them for a long time into great danger has left its mark on him. He is strained, taut and hard. He smiles often enough, mixes with his friends, but there is always a part of his mind in reserve, withdrawn. His sense of strain shows now and again, in quick flashes of anger, which he tries to guard against.²⁶⁵

Throughout the film there is an edgy quality, suited to Bogarde's style of acting, to Mason that makes him less calm and assured than characters such as Small, Ericson or the two Frasers. There are, however, similarities: he is courageous (he disobeys orders and joins his men on a mission) and an inspiring leader (the widow of a young pilot reveals that her husband had been proud to serve with him). Mason battles to prevent personal lives, his own and those of his crews, from interfering with the business of flying but finds himself falling for a Naval Intelligence officer, Eve Canyon (Dinah Sherridan), to whom he eventually reveals the weight of responsibility he feels for the lives of the crews under his command. Recalling the visit from the widow of a young pilot, he reflects on whether, despite not being present during raid, it was his own failings as a leader that led to the young man's death:

They always lead up to the same question: "Were you there the night it happened?" That night, the night that Greeno went was ... [killed]. You see Eve; it might have been my fault. I don't honestly know how much I was to blame, but I can't help thinking: "Did I go wrong? How much of it was due to me?"

When Eve counters that Mason surely cannot be responsible for everything that happens, he contradicts her:

But there are some things you've got to be responsible for: little things that show whether a squadron's slipping or not. Once they start banking on their luck rather than their training and discipline you know instinctively what's going to happen next. The accidents start, accidents which could have been avoided and you've got to try to convince them they're not dealing with a jinx but themselves.

Significantly, the script contains an apparent assertion by Mason, not included in the final cut, that it would be better if he were more detached: 'You never understand

²⁶⁵ BFI Library, S.1263 *Appointment in London* shooting script (9/6/53)

command till you get it and find out it's the loneliest job in the world unless you are as strong and indifferent as an ox and never ask yourself questions.'²⁶⁶ The removal of lines that suggest that leaders could not survive the pressures of leadership unless they were able to detach themselves from a concern for others is significant in that a key attribute of the "gentle knight" is a heartfelt concern for those they lead.

A clear example of leading from the front is provided by Commander Fraser in *Above Us the Waves*. After the first mission, which was not led by Fraser, ends in failure it is announced that a second mission, now using midget submarines, will be led by their commanding officer, affectionately known as the 'Old Man'. Although not making the final cut, the script contains dialogue that confirms Fraser as a commanding officer who leads from the front. Fraser, who was deemed too old for the underwater chariots, blames himself for the mission's failure as he was not there to lead his men 'at the crucial moment', suggesting that 'the next operation could be commanded by ... a more experienced officer.'²⁶⁷ The second mission involving three X-Type midget submarines is partially successful: The Tirpitz is disabled but one of the midget-submarines explodes with the loss of its crew and the two other crews are captured. The film ends with Fraser, lost in thought, looking out to the place where one of the crews was lost, no doubt reflecting on his own part in the deaths of his fellow submariners.

4.3 Alternative constructions of heroism: *Malta Story*, *The Sea Shall Not Have Them*, *Sailor of the King*, *The Red Beret*, *The Purple Plain*

Films such as *Angels*, *Cruel Sea*, *Gift Horse*, *Albert*, *Colditz* and *Dam Busters*, with their focus on one or two central characters, effectively set the template for the post-war British Second World War film. However, two films from the early 1950s – *Malta Story* and *The Sea Shall Not Have Them* – have a wider focus and allow for a more socially-inclusive construction of heroism.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ BFI Library, S.2764 *Above Us the Waves* shooting script (n.d.)

Malta Story has been seen as little more than a rerun of *Angels* which is understandable given some of the similarities – the story also features a newcomer to the group, in this case a reconnaissance pilot, whose death in action is relayed around the operations room – between the two films.²⁶⁸ However, the film has something to say about the heroism of civilian populations, both that of the islanders of Malta and, by extension, of the people of Britain during the Blitz, a theme largely absent from other films of this period.

The islanders are shown under frequent attack from enemy bomber aircraft and a romance between the young pilot, Ross (Alec Guinness), and Maria Gonzar (Muriel Pavlow), a local woman who works in the operations room, provides further insight into their suffering including the severe food shortages they endure. That the film is a tribute to the islanders' heroism is apparent from the start with 'the help of the Government and People of Malta' being acknowledged in the opening captions followed by words from a radio broadcast referring to a tribute paid to the islanders by Winston Churchill:

Mr Churchill in his speech in the House of Commons this afternoon said: "For nearly two years Malta has stood against the enemy. What a thorn it has been in their side. What a toll it has taken of their convoys. For the last six weeks, over four-hundred and fifty German front-line strength aircraft, and perhaps two-hundred Italian, have been venting their fury on Malta."

This theme of tribute continues in a publicly-broadcast address from the Governor of Malta expressing pride and gratitude on the award to the island of the George Cross and the film ends with his reflection on the islanders' sacrifice: 'We have seen hardship and we have seen triumph. We shall see more of both. If history remembers us let it say that we stood fast in faith, giving freely what little we had and what little we were, never doubting that we spent ourselves for the general good.'

²⁶⁸ Mackenzie, *British War Films 1939-1945*, p. 151.

It should be noted that in a story of a small island defying the might of German war machine there are parallels with Britain in the early days of war. The scenes of attacks made on the island's airfields, with salvation arriving in the form of new supplies of fighter aircraft, recall the Battle of Britain and scenes of civilians having endured aerial bombardment re-emerging from their shelters to resume their lives as soon as the all-clear signal is heard, filmed in documentary style, recall the determination of Londoners to do likewise seen in *Britain Can Take It* (1940). Scenes of the Blitz appear rarely in post-war British films and, as such, *Malta Story* contains one of the few post-war cinematic celebrations of the spirit of the Blitz.

Whereas most war films of this period tend to concentrate on a few key characters, *Sea Shall Not Have Them* is more an ensemble piece with the action split between four survivors of an aircraft shot down over the sea and the crew of the rescue launch searching for them. Significantly, in a film in which the officer (Anthony Steele) 'keeps a low profile', it is a non-commissioned officer, Flight Sergeant Singsby (Nigel Patrick), who provides the inspirational leadership.²⁶⁹ Recalling Sergeant Ned Fletcher (William Hartnell) in *The Way Ahead* (1944), Singsby is the tough-but-human NCO who embodies many of the qualities seen in cinematic commissioned officers at this time. He is a team-builder who, as one of the crew comments, knows that he has 'got to be tough' in order to do the job and, significantly, keep his crew alive. Although the scourge of idleness and inefficiency, he is quick to recognise the efforts of those who are doing their best and, interestingly, his approval is marked by the sharing of sweets. The film anticipates several of the later comedy films in which the characters, while far less idealised, are, none-the-less, both loyal and courageous, in particular director Lewis Gilbert's final war film *Light Up the Sky* (1960).

²⁶⁹ Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, p. 223.

At first the men on the launch are far more concerned with their own personal lives – a meeting with a girlfriend, concerns about a wife's threat to leave for another man, a new baby – and appear to view manning the launch as a purposeless inconvenience in their lives. However, when they realise that other men's lives are at stake, their commitment to the search for the downed aircrew is beyond question. As with other combat-oriented war films there is an action sequence towards the end of the film, with the launch finding the survivors and picking them up under bombardment from the enemy's coastal guns. However, the film's approval of the heroism of the crew of the rescue launch, by virtue of their selfless search for the survivors whom the sea must not take, is marked before this. This is seen most clearly when Hilda Tebitt (Joan Sims) the wife of one of the crew members, about to board a train for London and life with another man, overhears a conversation between the station commander and the wife of one of the survivors of the air crash for whom the launch is searching. The clearly-anxious wife is reassured that the crew of the rescue launch are doing everything to find the survivors and when Hilda realises the importance of her husband's work, she abandons plans to leave and the train leaves without her.

Although individualism plays little part in the construction of heroism in post-war British Second World War films, there are, however, three films from the early 1950s – *Sailor of the King* (1953), *The Red Beret* and *The Purple Plain* (1954) – in which the central character might be said to be fighting a private war. *Sailor* (aka *Single-Handed*) concerns the solo attempt by a Canadian seaman who is an expert marksman to delay, single-handedly, the repair of a German destroyer, enabling the pursuing Allied naval force to catch up with it and destroy it. In *Red Beret*, a "Canadian" volunteer to the Parachute Regiment, desperate to hide his past as a pilot with the US Army Air Force, shows for most of the film little enthusiasm for any form of team playing, resembling the classic Hollywood lone-wolf tough-guy, before leading the battalion out of a mine-field in the final battle sequence. Finally, set in Burma, *Purple Plain* concerns a Canadian pilot who, following the death of his wife in the London Blitz, shows little regard for his own safety or for that of his crew members until romance with a young Burmese woman gives him something to live for. As well as their focus on

individualism, these three films are linked by the device of casting an American actor in the guise of a Canadian who has joined the British armed forces, suggesting that individualism, also seen in *They Who Dare* and *Cockleshell Heroes*, is a feature of films made with Hollywood backing and an eye on the US market.

4.4 Audience and Critical Reception

The combat-oriented war films of this period proved extremely popular. Of the fifteen films considered in this chapter, three – *Angels One Five*, *The Cruel Sea* and *The Dam Busters* – enjoyed outstanding box-office success while ten – *Gift Horse*, *Malta story*, *The Red Beret*, *Appointment in London*, *Albert RN*, *Purple Plain*, *Above Us the Waves*, *The Colditz Story*, *The Sea Shall Not Have them* and *Cockleshell Heroes* – enjoyed major success.²⁷⁰ Only *Single-Handed* and *They Who Dare* failed to attract cinema-goers.²⁷¹ Audiences would almost certainly have been more family oriented than those that watched earlier combat-oriented and war-related films. Fourteen of the fifteen films carried a “U” certificate and, of these, half – *Angels One Five*, *Gift Horse*, *The Red Beret*, *They Who Dare*, *The Dam Busters*, *Above Us the Waves* and *Cockleshell Heroes* – were judged as especially suitable for children and family audiences.²⁷² Only *The Purple Plain* carried an “A” certificate. Audiences would also appear to have been fairly inclusive in terms of class and gender. There are frequent references to these films’ ‘universal’ appeal and suitability for ‘general’ audiences with, for example, *Gift Horse* recommended as ‘excellent entertainment for any audience’, *The Colditz Story* said to be ‘outstanding entertainment for any and every audience’ and *The Dam Busters* declared ‘a must for all types of hall’.²⁷³ In addition, *Cockleshell Heroes*, it was

²⁷⁰ *Kinematograph Weekly* 18 December 1952, *Kinematograph Weekly* 17 December 1953, *Kinematograph Weekly* 16 December 1954, *Kinematograph Weekly* 15 December 1955, *Kinematograph Weekly* 13 December, 1956

²⁷¹ *Kinematograph Weekly* 17 December 1953, *Kinematograph Weekly* 16 December 1954

²⁷² *Monthly Film Bulletin* May 1952, *Monthly Film Bulletin* August 1952, *Kinematograph Weekly* 20 August 1953, *Kinematograph Weekly* 4 February 1954, *Kinematograph Weekly* 31 March 1955, *Monthly Film Bulletin* May 1955, *Kinematograph Weekly* 21 April 1955, *Monthly Film Bulletin* June 1955, *Kinematograph Weekly* 17 November 1955, *Monthly Film Bulletin* January 1956

²⁷³ *Today’s Cinema* 11 June 1952, *Today’s Cinema* 26 January 1955, *Kinematograph Weekly* 21 April 1955

considered, would appeal to 'all classes and ages', with *Appointment in London* predicted 'to make a firm and favourable impression on all classes'.²⁷⁴ In terms of gender, both *The Colditz Story* and *Above Us the Waves*, it was felt, would appeal to 'both sexes', while *The Dam Busters*, it was predicted, would 'thrill the girls as well as the boys'.²⁷⁵

On the assumption that reviewers speak for their readership, there is evidence that audiences saw many of these films as tributes both to the men and women whose wartime service was being depicted on the screen and to the British people as a whole. *Gift Horse* was described as a 'great and stirring British war film', *Above Us the Waves* 'a worthy offering' as a tribute to the Royal Navy's submariners, 'heroism' was considered the 'keynote' of *Malta Story* and one critic declared of *Albert RN* 'as a race we can be proud of Albert'.²⁷⁶ Indeed, reviews from the quality, popular and trade press of five of the films, including the three most commercially successful – *Angels One Five*, *The Cruel Sea* and *The Dam Busters* – make much of the films' element of tribute. The extremely popular *Angels One Five*, 'an outstanding British film' according to one reviewer, was seen as 'a decent and moving tribute to Battle of Britain fighter pilots' and 'a worthy memorial to that finest hour in our nation's story' and left one reviewer with a patriotic glow: 'I came away from it a little misty-eyed and very proud that I belong to the same race as The Few who saved the world in the summer of 1940'.²⁷⁷ In similar vein, the equally popular *Cruel Sea* was described as 'a noble, harrowing and at times distinctly tough tribute to bravery at sea', a 'tribute to the navy' and, in addition to being 'magnificent screen entertainment', was 'a stirring tribute to all those who went to sea in ships during World War II and saved Britain from being starved into submission' that deserved and demanded to be shown.²⁷⁸ For

²⁷⁴ *Kinematograph Weekly* 17 November 1955, *Kinematograph Weekly* 12 February 1953

²⁷⁵ *Kinematograph Weekly* 25 January 1955, *Kinematograph Weekly* 31 March 1955, *Daily Mirror* 20 May 1955

²⁷⁶ *News of the World* 20 March 1952, *Spectator* 1 April 1955, *Times* 24 June 1953, *Times* 12 October 1953

²⁷⁷ *Daily Mirror* 21 March 1952, *Daily Worker* 22 March 1952, *Evening News* 19 March 1952, *News of the World* 23 March 1952

²⁷⁸ *Manchester Guardian* 28 March 1953, *Today's Cinema* 25 March 1953, *Kinematograph Weekly* 25 March 1953

two critics the film was also a tribute to the British character, reflecting the best of 'the national outlook, attitudes, behaviour, character and achievement' in 'a concentrate of all that is fine and loveable in the national character.'²⁷⁹ Indeed, one critic felt that during the film's screening audiences had 'lived in the company, not of heroes but men we should all be content to resemble' while another considered it encapsulated 'the whole story of Britain's ponderous, unspectacular but finally devastating heroism' and declared: 'At last – a brilliant, starkly factual British war film does the nation proud and will impress the world.'²⁸⁰ Furthermore, the outstandingly successful *The Dam Busters*, certain critics felt, would both inspire audiences – an 'inspiring story of heroism' and 'a great and inspiring film' – and make them feel proud: 'a proud picture' that audiences should be 'proud to see'.²⁸¹ Indeed, one reviewer felt the film epitomised 'the quiet courage and the calm, determined enthusiasm which enabled the country to pull itself out of the darkest straights of its long history' while another declared that 'the picture climbs to clouds of glory which befit the R.A.F. itself ... [it] was made by Britons in Britain and I like to think that only our people could have given it to us', concluding that *Dam Busters* 'is no ordinary film. It's a great and inspiring experience.'²⁸² *The Colditz Story* was hailed as a tribute to the qualities of the men who refused to accept captivity, to 'the resolution, the resource and the stark courage of the men who got away' and to their 'undaunted spirit', while with their displays of 'humour', 'phlegm' and 'discipline', declared one critic, 'the film gives a pretty clear notion of the British character'.²⁸³ Similarly, *Cockleshell Heroes* was described as 'inspiring' and an 'exciting and intelligent tribute to a heroic group of men'.²⁸⁴ Indeed, watching the film left one reviewer feeling they had been in the presence of greatness: 'You come away with the inescapable thought that you have had the rare privilege of living for just this short hour and a half with very gallant gentlemen.'²⁸⁵

²⁷⁹ *Daily Mail* 27 March 1953, *Spectator* 27 March 1953

²⁸⁰ *Daily Telegraph* 25 March 1953, *Daily Mirror* 25 March 1953

²⁸¹ *Today's Cinema* 15 April 1955, *Daily Mirror* 20 May 1955, *Daily Sketch* 19 May 1955, *Star* 20 May 1955

²⁸² *Evening News* 17 May 1955, *News of the World* 22 May 1955

²⁸³ *Daily Telegraph* 29 January 1955, *Star* 28 January 1955, *Observer* 30 January 1955

²⁸⁴ *Kinematograph Weekly* 17 November 1955, *Sunday Express* 20 November 1955

²⁸⁵ *News of the World* 20 November 1955

Not only were cinema-goers being encouraged to make their way to their local cinemas as an act of tribute – one reviewer instructed his readers to see *The Dam Busters* with the words ‘See it and be proud’ – but cinema owners were also being informed by the trade press that they had a duty to screen these films that went beyond their responsibility to their shareholders.²⁸⁶ *The Cruel Sea* was described as a film ‘which every cinema should be proud and eager to present’ and one that ‘deserves, nay demands, the widest playing time’, *The Dam Busters* ‘a deservedly popular booking for all popular situations’ and *The Colditz Story* a film from which cinema owners had a ‘responsibility to let no patron escape’.²⁸⁷

Given the popularity of films that were considered to be fitting tributes to the British at war, it is significant that one of only two combat-oriented films of this period to fail commercially, *They Who Dare*, was considered by several critics to have misjudged the national character. One critic disliked scenes of British troops ‘squabbling and accusing each other’, another objected to the sight of British troops behaving like ‘ninnies, nincompoops or neurotics’ and yet another declared that the director had failed to capture ‘the character of the British under stress’.²⁸⁸

There is a sense too that these films served as honours to be awarded to deserving branches of the Services. It was felt that *Appointment in London* addressed the injustice of insufficient ‘homage and honour’ being paid to the crews of Bomber Command, to whom it was a ‘belated’ tribute, doing for them what *Angels* had done for Fighter Command, with one critic declaring: ‘At last a film has been made of the wartime effort of Bomber Command!’²⁸⁹ *Malta Story* was considered a belated tribute to the George Cross island, *The Sea Shall Not Have Them* evidence that British cinema was ‘working conscientiously through the unsung branches of the armed forces’ and

²⁸⁶ *News of the World* 22 May 1955

²⁸⁷ *Today’s Cinema* 25 March 1953, *Kinematograph Weekly* 26 March 1953, *Today’s Cinema* 15 April 1955, *Today’s Cinema* 26 January 1955

²⁸⁸ *Daily Herald* 5 February 1954, *Daily Express* 5 February 1954, *Financial Times* 8 February 1954

²⁸⁹ *Daily Express* 12 February 1953, *Manchester Guardian* 14 February 1953, *Daily Mail* 13 February 1953, *Willesden Chronicle* 13 March 1953

Cockleshell Heroes proof that it had been ‘well worth waiting for’ the turn of the Royal Marines.²⁹⁰

Reviews also suggest a growing sense of affection for the actors playing the “gentle knight” characters and this is most evident in the case of Jack Hawkins who played four such characters – in *Angels, Cruel Sea, Malta Story* and *The Intruder* (1953) – between 1952 and 1953. Reviewing *Angels*, several critics, referring to Hawkins by name, described how he ‘makes a warm and convincing senior officer’, ‘shines as the stern station C.O. who never lacks the human touch’ and ‘suggests admirably a commander of men’.²⁹¹ The following year, Hawkins’s character in *Cruel Sea* as was described as a ‘stern, lonely, devoted sea captain’, ‘a reluctant but resourceful hero’, ‘forceful, human and touching’ and ‘strong in his sense of duty, but [with] tenderness and feeling underneath’, with one critic declaring that Hawkins was a ‘John Bull’ for the modern era.²⁹² Although not a combat-orientated war film *Intruder* sees Hawkins reprising his role as the paternalistic officer – here attempting to find out why a soldier he once commanded has turned to crime – and establishing himself as the pre-eminent “gentle knight”. Rather than bemoaning the familiarity of the roles he was playing, several critics argued that Hawkins was creating film heroes that embodied highly desirable qualities: contrasting the ‘Hawkins hero’ with some of the anti-heroes of post-war British cinema.²⁹³ He was ‘that perfect example of the rugged-cum-sensitive gentleman’, ‘the sympathetic Commanding Officer’ as well as the embodiment of ‘strength, chivalry, kindness and the desire to help weaker brethren’ and ‘decency and moral courage’.²⁹⁴ Indeed, one critic went as far as to suggest, with perhaps a hint of nostalgia, that not only was Hawkins providing a most welcome and unique counter-balance to the anti-heroes of gangster films and the disturbed protagonists of psychological dramas but that the nation itself was in need of more

²⁹⁰ *Sketch* 15 July 1953, *Sunday Chronicle* 5 December 1954, *Daily Herald* 18 November 1955

²⁹¹ *Evening Standard* 30 March 1952, *Daily Mirror* 21 March 1952, *Daily Telegraph* 24 March 1952

²⁹² *Daily Herald* 25 March 1953, *Daily Mirror* 25 March 1953, *News Chronicle* 27 March 1953, *Daily Express* 27 March 1953, *Daily Mail* 27 March 1953

²⁹³ *Evening News* 15 October 1953

²⁹⁴ *Spectator* 16 October 1953, *Daily Mirror* 16 October 1953, *Daily Mail* 16 October 1953, *Evening News* 15 October 1953

men in his mould: 'The Hawkins hero represents loyalty, courage, leadership, unselfishness, compassion and all those things that used to make this such a pleasant land to live and work in.'²⁹⁵

It has been noted that it was often said that Hawkins, John Mills and Kenneth More were among Britain's greatest wartime assets, and the names of Richard Todd and Trevor Howard could be added to this "roll of honour".²⁹⁶ Given these actors' association with "gentle knight" characters this, albeit light-hearted, assertion suggests a general approval of the qualities they embody. Indeed, the most commercially successful British Second World War films from the early 1950s – *Angels One Five*, *Cruel Sea* and *Dam Busters* – are those that feature "gentle knight" characters. Furthermore, despite the general change in war films evident during the second half of the decade, the commercial success of the two films in particular – *Reach for the Sky* (1956) and *Sink the Bismarck!* (1960) – in which Kenneth More carries the baton for the sort of characters previously played by Hawkins, indicates that such characters had been taken firmly to the hearts of the British cinema-going public and suggests the continued power of the narrative in which the Second World War had been fought and won by such "gentle knights". Interestingly, *Picturegoer*, which had carried a piece written by Hawkins on the making of *The Cruel Sea* in its review of 1953 – a film it had awarded its "Seal of Merit" – was the following year hailing him as British cinema's leading male star and suggesting that there was only a handful of British actors – including a certain Kenneth More – considered likely to challenge his dominant position.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁵ *Evening News* 15 October 1953

²⁹⁶ Chapman, 'Our Finest Hour Revisited', p. 68.

²⁹⁷ *Picturegoer Annual 1953-54* (London: Odhams Press, 1953) pp. 32-4., pp. 37-9., *Picturegoer Annual 1954-55* (London: Odhams Press, 1953) pp. 108-110.

Conclusion

British combat-orientated war films from the 1950s have been dismissed by several writers as escapist nostalgia in reaction to social change at home and Britain's declining prestige on the world stage. However, this chapter has shown that these films should be viewed primarily as stories of wartime heroism that are clearly intended as tributes to those who fought and sometimes died in the service of their country. This is apparent from the opening or closing dedications, from the acknowledgements of assistance from veterans and/or the various branches of the Services and from the efforts made to establish the films' authenticity that can be seen in their realistic narratives, their close attention to detail, their incorporation of actuality footage and their use of a visual style associated with wartime documentary films. This theme of tribute continues in the way heroes are constructed as an updated version of the chivalric hero, a leader whose devotion to duty and to those under his command are inseparable, who has a deep sense of responsibility for the lives of others, is brave, effective in a crisis and who leads from the front. This character is benevolent and compassionate and displays 'decency and moral courage' and it can be argued that films that feature such characters show a nation paying tribute to itself by saluting heroes who embody the qualities – dedication, determination, loyalty, courage, concern for others, self-sacrifice – that it most values, qualities it believes brought it through the conflict.²⁹⁸ In addition, it has been seen that the element of tribute, including the creation of idealised chivalric heroes, held a particular appeal for audiences: films that were noted for their element of tribute to Britain's war heroes, along with those that featured chivalric heroes, tended to be those that were most popular with cinema audiences. In view of this, it is clear that tribute rather than escapism is the pre-eminent characteristic of combat-oriented films of this period.

There is evidence too to suggest that these films proved popular with audiences that were very inclusive in terms of their age, class and gender. Murphy has argued that the films' emphasis on personal courage along with the casting of actors such as the

²⁹⁸ *Evening News* 15 October 1953

rugged Jack Hawkins, as opposed to the suave Clive Brook, made them more appealing to working-class audiences.²⁹⁹ There can be no denying that in these films officers feature more prominently than the other ranks and it is not unreasonable to see this as a privileging of the middle-classes. However, it would certainly appear that these modern-day chivalric heroes, with their selflessness and sense of responsibility for the lives and well-being of their charges, had an appeal that went beyond middle-class cinema audiences.

²⁹⁹ Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, pp. 204-5.

Chapter 5 – Addressing the Horrors of War

5.1 Reviewing the Charges

Lindsay Anderson's attack on 1950s war films contains the assertion that British cinema was failing in its duty to produce war films that portrayed the horror of war in a way that would serve as a warning against future wars.³⁰⁰ For Roy Armes, writing over twenty years later, a key characteristic of British war films was the way such horror was underplayed:

These films underplay the horrors of combat (as, for instance, when the captain in [*The Battle of the River Plate*] quite disregards the fact that he has been badly wounded in the leg). War is not a savage unknown but kind of ultra-serious chess game, in which the enemy can be outmanoeuvred by superior intelligence. This is the message behind the P.O.W. escape stories, the bombing of the Mohne dam, the evasion of the H.M.S. Amethyst.³⁰¹

There is much evidence from the second half of the decade to contradict such assertions with a number of films exploring the horror and brutality of war – *A Town like Alice* (1956), *The Camp on Blood Island* (1958), *Yesterday's Enemy* and *Circle of Deception* (1960) – and some – *Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) and *Orders to Kill* (1958) – that might be said to suggest that war is futile. Indeed, there are many films from the second half of the 1950s that are, to borrow Durnat's phrase, if not exactly anti-war then certainly 'pretty discouraging about it.'³⁰² However, there is little in British war films from the first half of the 1950s that could be described as truly harrowing or disturbing, nor do these films appear to raise the sort of questions about the conduct of war that would be addressed during the second half of the decade. Could it be argued that by ignoring the 'horrors of combat' and presenting war simply as a source of adventure the British cinema industry was contributing to a culture of war readiness that had so troubled Paul Rotha at the beginning of the decade?³⁰³

³⁰⁰ Anderson, pp. 236-7.

³⁰¹ Armes, p. 177-8.

³⁰² Durnat, p. 84.

³⁰³ Armes, p. 177.; Rotha, 'Into Battle'

Certainly, there is plenty of evidence of the various branches of the Services using, or at least being encouraged by film promoters to use, screenings of war films as a platform for recruitment drives.³⁰⁴ Is it possible that the British cinema was contributing to such a culture of war readiness whereby young men and women would leave the cinema, recruitment literature in hand, eager for their opportunity to prove themselves in war? For such a charge to stick, it would be necessary to establish that films of the early 1950s served to do three things: to glamorise war, to ignore the suffering caused by war and to dehumanise the nation's former enemies.

I: Glamourising war?

On the first count, if any sub-genre of war film was likely to glamorise war in terms of presenting it as an exciting game it would surely be the special-mission film in which a small, highly-skilled group of hand-picked Servicemen overcome overwhelming odds. The four such films of this period – *They Who Dare*, *The Dam Busters*, *Above Us the Waves* and *Cockleshell Heroes* – follow a similar narrative trajectory – a specialist team is trained and equipped to attack a target impossible to destroy by conventional means – and it is particularly significant that each of them ends not with a triumphant celebration of the mission's accomplishment but with a visual reflection on the mission's human cost.

The two commando-mission films – *They Who Dare* and *Cockleshell Heroes* – use a similar visual device: empty places at a dining table in *They Who Dare* and ghostly images of fallen comrades marching alongside those who returned in *Cockleshell Heroes*. *Above Us the Waves* ends with the captured crews of two midget submarines looking out to sea to the place where their comrades in the third submarine died when their vessel exploded, the camera picking out some of the floating debris from the vessel. Each of these concluding scenes is brief but in *Dam Busters* there is a much longer and extremely poignant visual reflection on the human cost of the mission with

³⁰⁴ Mackenzie, *British War Films 1939-1945*, p. 131.

shots of the empty rooms of those who would not be returning, the camera lingering on sporting trophies in a way that recalls the Great War sentiment of the nation having lost the flower of its youth. This is followed by a conversation between the film's two key protagonists, Gibson (Todd) and Barnes Wallis (Michael Redgrave), in which the number of casualties is revealed and the film ends with Gibson, seen in long-shot, returning to his office to write letters to the families of the men who had died. Although these films end with a reflection on the losses incurred, none of them asserts that the mission was too costly in human terms to be justified. Indeed, in *Dam Busters* there is an explicit assurance from Gibson that everyone on the mission would have gone even had they known they would not return. None of these films contains anything that could be said to be an anti-war statement, nor could they be said to be 'pretty discouraging' about war. However, what these reflections on the human cost of war do is to ensure that these films end victorious but not triumphant.

In addition, as previously noted, films of this period eschew the sort individual heroism that is associated with the glorification of war, instead privileging leaders who place their faith in procedure, discipline, training and team-work. Indeed, the two commando-mission films, as has been seen, caution explicitly against a buccaneering approach to leadership. It should be noted too that although these films can be described as adventure films, scenes of combat take up a relatively small proportion of their time, usually towards the end of the film – the attack on the St Nazaire docks in *Gift Horse*, the raid on the Ruhr dams in *Dam Busters* – while most of the film is concerned with routine procedure: training, preparation and, for much of the time, waiting. When scenes of combat are shown the emphasis is on following procedure rather than on individual heroics. Furthermore, as has been seen, films of this period were clearly intended as tributes to those who had served in the war and a high degree of authenticity was required for the film to be accepted as sufficiently respectful to their memory. It would seem reasonable to conclude that attempts to glamorise war or to present it as a game would fly in the face of the requirement to ensure authenticity and, indeed, would have been seen as disrespectful to the memories of those who had fought and died.

II: Ignoring the suffering caused by war?

On the second count, that of ignoring the suffering caused by war, there is little evidence of films including either graphic battle-field images or of focusing on the impact of war on civilians. As scenes of combat take up a small part of films, scenes of death and serious injury are rare. There are occasional shots of ships torpedoed and planes shot down, very occasionally a soldier being shot, but these are seen from a distance.

There are, however, frequent reminders that people lose loved ones in time of war: the young widow who visits the RAF station to meet her late husband's commanding officer in *Appointment in London*; the petty officer who returns to port to find that the woman he planned to marry has been killed in an air raid in *Cruel Sea*; the naval rating who loses his wife and child in *Gift Horse*. Although ever-present, it would be easy to overlook such reminders of loss because of the restraint with which this is dealt. A clear example of such restraint can be seen in *Gift Horse* where Commander Fraser (Trevor Howard) receives the news that his son has been killed in action. Fraser receives the news in a telegram on Christmas day, an occasion when, according to tradition, the ship's captain greets the youngest crew member. The young man Fraser has to greet is similar in age and appearance to his son. Fraser makes no mention of the telegram to anyone else on board and he completes his duties without anyone suspecting that anything is amiss before leaving the ship and walking away to grieve alone.

Similar restraint can be seen in *Angels* and *Malta Story*, both of which end with similar poignant reflections on the loss of young men, both pilots, in battle. *Angels* ends with Nadine Clinton (Dulcie Gray) placing a lantern at a window of her cottage so that it can be seen at the end of the runway. It had been revealed during the film that Nadine, who had become something of a surrogate mother to the young pilot (John Gregson),

placed the lantern there to guide the pilots back home at night and this particularly powerful combination of visual imagery recalls both the lighting of candles for the dead and the sounding of the “Last Post” to call Service personnel home. *Malta Story* ends with Maria (Muriel Pavlow), an islander who had planned to marry a young pilot, revisiting the site where they had picnicked and planned their lives together only hours earlier. As she remembers him, she looks out to sea, quite possibly, as she worked in the operations room, in the direction of the place where his plane was shot down. Again the visual imagery is powerful, combining the idea of visiting places associated with lost loved ones and that of grieving without having a body to bury.

In terms of the war’s impact on the civilian population there is, in combat-oriented war films, a general avoidance of the ‘horror of combat’. Missions undertaken behind enemy lines have specific military targets – airfields and aircraft, ports and shipping – and there is little suggestion of civilian casualties. *Dam Busters*, for example, one of two films to feature Bomber Command, makes clear from the outset the importance of the Ruhr valley dams to Germany’s war effort and *Appointment in London*, the other, appears to go out of its way to establish that the target is of vital military importance, with explicit mention of the type of town, who built it, when it was built and what is being manufactured there: ‘The target is a factory town built by the enemy during the last year for the assembly of V1 bombs, and the whole place has got to be wiped right out.’

As an exception to the general rule, one scene in *Malta Story* stands out as a rare reminder of civilian casualties in war. Shortly after an off-duty RAF officer and his girlfriend (Anthony Steel and Renee Asherson) disembark from a bus filled with local children, women and elderly people, the bus comes under aerial attack. When the pair reaches the bus they find it engulfed in flames with no prospect of survivors. The scene is restrained and in no way graphic in that the burning bus is seen only from a distance but it is particularly powerful in that the now-dead passengers had been seen, parents and children smiling, only minutes earlier.

III: Depersonalising the enemy?

There is evidence to contradict any accusation of depersonalising the enemy from what might be considered an unexpected source, the prisoner-of-war film, the sub-genre of British war films that has attracted most hostility for its alleged depiction of war as a game.³⁰⁵ The two prisoner-of-war films of this period – *Albert* and *Colditz Story* – contain assertions that amidst the brutality of war, represented by the Gestapo and the SS, there were decent and honourable Germans. That such assertions can easily be overlooked can be seen in the assessment of one critic who clearly saw *Albert* as ‘simply a good adventure story’ and questioned whether war should be presented in this way.³⁰⁶ However, there is more than an adventure story to be found in *Albert*. The first escape attempt using “Albert”, a dummy realistic enough to pass as a naval officer during headcounts, results in the escaping officer being murdered by the Gestapo, reportedly shot while attempting to escape. It is clear that this act of brutality has saddened and shamed the camp commandant and many of the guards. The commandant arranges for a wreath to be presented by one of the guards who ‘steps forward and, with tears in his weak, good-natured eyes, hands the wreath to Maddox’, the Senior British Officer, on behalf of the German Navy.³⁰⁷

In addition, the film juxtaposes British and German accounts of bombing raids in a way that emphasises the suffering of civilians in both countries and also raises questions about the reliability of propaganda. News from a BBC broadcast concerning ‘the heaviest raid yet made on Berlin’ involving the dropping of ‘over 2,300 tons’ of explosives is relayed around the camp by a messenger and the bombing of nearby Hamburg features prominently with searchlights, fires and explosions illuminating the night sky and providing a backdrop to the camp. Later in the film, the Germans present their own version of the bombing campaign in an address broadcast to the camp over loud-speakers:

³⁰⁵ Medhurst, p. 35.

³⁰⁶ *Time and Tide* 17 October 1953

³⁰⁷ BFI Library, S.11722 *Albert RN* shooting script (n.d.)

Achtung! Achtung! Here is the news in English! In reprisal for British and American terror-bombing of German women and children, large forces of the Luftwaffe attacked strategic targets in Britain last night. The ports of Southampton, Plymouth and Liverpool were left in smouldering ruins ...

Albert also contains further reminders that war is not a game, exploring, like Guy Morgan's earlier script for *The Captive Heart*, the pain of separation from loved ones and the men's fears about returning to civilian life: Maddox, the SBO, has lost both of his sons while imprisoned; one prisoner receives news about a child he has never seen and another is convinced of his wife's infidelity. Ainsworth (Anthony Steel), *Albert*'s creator, has been writing to a girl he has never met and plans to marry her when the war is over but his fears about his ability to readjust to civilian life make him doubtful about escape. Indeed, one critic considered that the film's emphasis was not on the mechanics of the escape, but on the 'doubts and hesitations' of *Albert*'s creator, while another felt that Ainsworth was 'a new kind of hero for a prisoner-of-war film', namely one who 'would just as soon stay in'.³⁰⁸

That *Colditz Story* can be described as an adventure story is unsurprising given that it is based upon the best-selling memoirs of Pat Reid, the first British prisoner at Colditz to be appointed as Escape Officer, who reflected that his boyhood ambitions to experience the sort of excitement to be found in riding in steeple-chases and hunting big game had been satisfied by his experiences as a prisoner-of-war.³⁰⁹ In addition, questions have been raised regarding its authenticity, in terms of the conditions depicted.³¹⁰ Such is the context for one critic's attack on this 'reprehensible' film in which the war is simply 'an exotic backdrop for masculine high-jinks, a stirring test of strength and ingenuity'.³¹¹ However, amidst the high adventure and the comedy, there is also a reminder of the darker side of war and an assertion that many Germans are decent and honourable. Following the discovery of an informer among the prisoners,

³⁰⁸ *Sunday Times* 11 October 1953, *Star* 9 October 1953

³⁰⁹ P.R. Reid, *The Colditz Story* (London: Coronet, 1972), p. 9.

³¹⁰ S.P. Mackenzie, *The Colditz Myth: British and Commonwealth Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

³¹¹ Medhurst, p. 35.

the Dutch Escape Officer describes how the Gestapo had put pressure on a Polish prisoner to inform them of escape attempts by threatening to kill his family. Colonel Richmond, the British SBO, reflects that British prisoners are spared such pressures and declares: 'Thank God for the English Channel.' As in *Albert* such brutality from the Gestapo is contrasted with the sympathetic portrayals of German officers: the commandant (Frederick Valk) is a soldier of the "Old School" who clearly has little time for the Nazis and his second-in-command Hauptmann Priem (Dennis Shaw) displays, despite his determination to thwart escape attempts, a degree of sympathy for the prisoners and a sense of humour. Indeed, on the basis of *Colditz Story* one writer has included the film's director Guy Hamilton, along with Michael Powell and Roy Ward Baker, as part of a group of 'enlightened film-makers' for challenging stereotypes of German soldiers as either stupid or evil.³¹²

It is interesting to note that although *Colditz Story* has certainly received harsh treatment from some film historians, critical response at the time was, in general, very positive, despite a growing sense of weariness with war films in general and prisoner-of-war films in particular, with several critics declaring it an excellent film even though the subject matter was becoming familiar.³¹³ Indeed, the film was enthusiastically received, even by certain representatives of the quality press: Dilys Powell considered that the film 'manages to say something quite serious' and Caroline Lejeune declared: 'I should be sorry if you missed "The Colditz Story", however tired you may be of war films. This is a very special war film, as adventurous and high-spirited as Dumas, or Doyle, or Stevenson.'³¹⁴

³¹² Ramsden, *Don't Mention the War*, p. 324.

³¹³ *Reynold's News* 30 January 1955; *News Chronicle* 27 January 1955; *Daily Herald* 28 January 1955, *Evening News* 27 January 1955; *Sunday Express* 30 January 1955

³¹⁴ *Sunday Times* 30 January 1955, *Observer* 30 January 1955

5.2 –A Possible Anti-war Statement from the Early 1950s – *The Cruel Sea*

One British war film, *Cruel Sea*, stands out from those made the early 1950s in its exploration of war, containing frequent reminders of its horrors: survivors of torpedo attacks, their lungs full of oil, soon to die; the brief uncovering of a dead Wren officer; the crew returning to home port to find the city smouldering; sailors trapped below decks whose desperate cries would later haunt the ship's commander. Of particular interest is the character of Ferraby (John Stratton) a junior officer who is last seen suffering a breakdown following the sinking of the *Compass Rose* after having been shown on several occasions looking extremely tense and nervous during lulls in the action. It is instructive that the script contains several references to Ferraby's state of mind and, in addition, a scene which was cut from the final release in which he talks to his wife about being constantly anxious whilst at sea.³¹⁵ In addition, Ericson (Jack Hawkins), whose demeanour darkens following the sinking of *Compass Rose*, is keenly aware that the stresses of war, while not necessarily threatening his ability to captain the ship, are compromising his ability to function as he believes a human being should, at one point sharing his fears with Lockhart, his second-in-command and friend:

It's getting to be a different kind of war Number One. The people in it have got different too ... At the beginning, there was time for all sorts of things – understanding people, making allowances for them, wondering whether they were happy, even whether they liked you or not. Now, the war doesn't seem to be a matter of feelings any more. All that finished with *Compass Rose*. Now it's just a matter of killing the enemy. I suppose you think that's all wrong and a man should never allow himself to be dehumanised by war.

This scene contains the profound suggestion that prolonged exposure to the strains of combat could dehumanise even the most human of the nation's "gentle knights". As such, there is an assertion that the gentlemanly conduct of war celebrated in films from the early 1950s might well not have survived a longer war. *Cruel Sea* has, for good reason, been described as the nearest that British cinema came to making an anti-war statement.³¹⁶ The film does not flinch from showing the darker side of war in

³¹⁵ BFI Library, S.52 *The Cruel Sea* shooting script (7/3/52)

³¹⁶ Medhurst, p. 36.

a way that other films of the early 1950s do not. However, it differs from later films. First, it is more restrained – as, for example, the way the death and destruction of an aerial bombardment is captured briefly in the face of Ericson. Second, any broader questions about war and the conduct of war – contained, for example, in Ericson's remark that German submariners do not look any different from British sailors – remain largely unexplored.

Conclusion

When it comes to addressing what might be termed the brutality and folly of war, war films from the early 1950s could be said to underplay the horrors of war. Indeed, war films from this period have a lightness of touch that contrasts with, for example, the earlier *Against the Wind* with its themes of betrayal and unmarked heroism and, for example, the later *Circle of Deception* with its plan to sacrifice a volunteer in an attempted deception. This absence of thematic darkness is accompanied by an absence of any expressionist/*film noir* visual style such as that seen, for example, in the earlier *They Made Me a Fugitive*, *Frieda* and *The Woman with No Name* to emphasise anxiety, fear and dislocation that re-emerges in later films such as *Count Five and Die* and *Orders to Kill*.

However, that is not to say that war films from the early 1950s understate war's horrors to such an extent that they can be accused of contributing to a state of complacency regarding the danger of subsequent wars. They do not glamorise war or ignore the suffering it causes, nor do they demonise or seek to dehumanise the enemy. There are frequent reminders of the suffering experienced in war and the occasional assertion that war can be brutal. The horrors of war are certainly not ignored, they are frequently present, but they are, at this time, treated with a restraint that is perhaps hardly surprising given that these films were made less than ten years after the end of hostilities. Furthermore, in what can be seen as part of a process of sharing the experience of war with those too young to have experienced it, these films were both aimed at and enjoyed by family audiences.

Chapter 6: War-related Films of the Early 1950s

During the period 1952-1955 relatively few war-related films were released and fewer still proved popular with cinema-goers. However, despite their lack of commercial success, several of these war-related films are significant as they show the British cinema addressing particular war-related issues. Two films – *The Intruder* and *The Ship That Died of Shame* (1955) – constitute, when joined the following year by *Tiger in the Smoke* (1956), a brief cycle that revisits the theme of the Serviceman who struggles to adjust to post-war society and *The Divided Heart* (1954) provides a rare example of a British film that explores the impact of the war on civilians in mainland Europe.

In several war-related films of this period – *The Heart of the Matter* (1953), *Those People Next Door* (1953) and *The End of the Affair* (1955) – the Second World War features as a backdrop rather than a major player and therefore these films will not be discussed in any detail. More problematic is *The Gentle Gunman* (1952), the story of an IRA volunteer, Terrence Sullivan (John Mills), sent to London during the war to organise the planting of bombs but who rejects the use of violence after living amongst the English and seeing the suffering inflicted by German bombers. The film contains studio-shot scenes of London during the Blitz, a sight rarely seen in British war films of this period, filmed with documentary-style attention to detail and two scenes in particular stand out for their clear condemnation of violence: one in which a group of children is playing innocently near to an IRA bomb that is about to go off, the other in which another group of children plays in a street where an IRA ambush is about to take place.³¹⁷ Furthermore, a key character is a sixteen-year-old boy who follows his father into the IRA and is shot during his first mission and later dies. However, despite the inclusion of scenes that condemn violence set against a wartime backdrop, and despite even Terrence's reference to its being 'fashionable' currently to drop bombs on children, the overall sentiment is a sense of revulsion towards violence, characteristic

³¹⁷ BFI Library, *The Gentle Gunman* information folder

of Ealing Studios, rather than an anti-war statement in the context of the Second World War.³¹⁸

6.1 The Returning Serviceman Revisited – *The Intruder*, *The Ship That Died of Shame* and *Tiger in the Smoke*

The theme of servicemen experiencing difficulty adjusting to life in post-war Britain was a particularly popular one in British cinema between 1947 and 1948. After a brief pause, this territory was revisited in three films released between 1953 and 1956: *The Intruder*, *The Ship That Died of Shame* and *Tiger in the Smoke*. The key significance of these later films lies in the way in which they engage with the questions of whether the perceived “wartime spirit and values” – including notions of duty, honour, self-sacrifice and loyalty to one’s fellows – have survived the war, and how former Service personnel are supported in peace-time. Here, the focus is largely on the world of the military – its personnel, values, traditions and institutions – rather than on society as a whole. However, it is possible to view, for example, a commitment on the part of the Services to former personnel as part of a wider societal commitment. These films differ in certain aspects from their late 1940s predecessors, focussing on groups rather than individuals or pairs and taking place several years after, rather than immediately after, the war, something that allows for an assessment of how the victorious nation has looked after its former heroes. Like their predecessors, these three films can be included in the canon of British *film noir*, although on several counts *Intruder* fits less easily into this genre.

In *Intruder* Jack Hawkins largely reprises his roles as the benevolent, paternalistic leader seen in *Angels* and *Cruel Sea*. Here, events take place some seven or eight years after the end of the war when Wolf Merton (Hawkins), the former commander of a tank division, returns home to find his house being burgled. Recognising the burglar as

³¹⁸ Jeffrey Richards, ‘Basil Dearden at Ealing’, in *Liberal Directions: Basil Dearden and Post-war British Film Culture* (Trowbridge: Flick Books, 1997), p. 26.; Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios* (London: Cameron and Tayleur, 1977), p. 147.

Ginger Edwards (Michael Medwyn), a man he considers to have been ‘one of the most fearless and spirited troopers’ he had ever commanded, he tries to persuade him to give himself up but, fearing that Merton will hand him over to the police, Ginger runs away and the remainder of the film is concerned with Merton’s attempts to track him down and discover why he has turned to crime.³¹⁹ Eventually, Merton learns that Ginger had escaped from prison having served seven years of a ten-year sentence for manslaughter for the, accidental, killing of his sadistic uncle who he blamed for the death of his younger brother. The film ends with Ginger giving himself up to the police to serve the remaining years of his sentence and Merton assuring him that he will be waiting for him on his release with help to adjust to civilian life.

An insight into Merton’s character is given in a number of flashbacks. A clear example of his dedication to his subordinates and of his humility can be seen in his determination to stand by a young officer, John Summers (George Cole), who he has promoted in the field and who has serious doubts about his ability to serve as an officer and, particularly, in Merton’s humble remark that follows his attempts to reassure him: ‘I’m not allowed to make mistakes!’ Instructions in the script accompanying Merton’s admonishing of a junior officer – ‘not unkindly’ and ‘gravely but gently’ – provide a further indication of his paternalism.³²⁰ However, Merton is not a push-over as can be seen from the way in which he deals with the pompous and cowardly Captain Pirry (Dennis Price), a man who deserts his post and subordinates during a tank battle and whose continued trading on his military rank in peacetime anticipates the *The League of Gentlemen* (1960) in suggesting that not all accounts of wartime heroism are reliable. During Merton’s search for Ginger it is clear that he is motivated not by an idle curiosity as to why Ginger has turned to crime but by a genuine desire to stand by a man who had been ready to risk his life to save other members of the unit. Indeed, it is easy to imagine that Merton is a post-war version of Ericson or Small, seeking to help out when one of their former charges struggles to cope with life after the war. As such, the film makes the clear assertion that the

³¹⁹ BFI Library, *The Intruder* small press-book (1953)

³²⁰ BFI Library, S.14416 *The Intruder* shooting script “Six Came Back” (n.d.)

“wartime spirit and values” have survived the conflict and that there are other former commanding officers like Merton who will be around to look after their subordinates.

It is somewhat ironic that a film that was deemed suitable for family audiences should be based on a source novel, “Line on Ginger”, that contained plentiful material either for a classic gangster *film noir* with its black-market activity and *femme-fatale* or for a psychological drama with its suggestion of sexually-motivated sadism.³²¹ Furthermore, as well as departing from the darkness and adult nature of the source novel, the film’s makers also finally rejected material contained in the various scripts that would have suggested that the wartime bonds of comradeship have been severed. One script begins with words from Merton – ‘Our tracks crossed and re-crossed in the desert like threads connecting our lives. But when we went back to civilian life the threads seemed to break and we went back to our own ways ...’ – but in the final cut these words are gone.³²² Furthermore, in the script but not in the final cut, Merton responds to Ginger’s assertion that life has finally taught him the lesson that ‘it’s each man out for himself’, by replying: ‘But that’s not true and you know it. Was it each man out for himself at Tobruk and Cassino and Arnhem? Why should we forget in peace what we learned in war?’³²³ As such, *Intruder* suggests that the selfless, paternalist leader is alive and well and in him lives on the spirit and values of the war years. Indeed, the film, with its optimistic and reassuring quality, is more in keeping with the general mood of the combat-oriented war films of the early 1950s than either the earlier returning servicemen films or the two later films in this brief cycle that would see a descent, via the more ambiguous *The Ship That Died of Shame*, to the pessimism and despair of *Tiger in the Smoke*.

Beginning during the war and resuming several years after the end of hostilities, *Ship* follows the fortunes of the crew of a motor gun boat, the 1087. The boat’s skipper Bill Randall (George Baker) loses his wife in a bombing raid and, after the war, finds it hard

³²¹ Robert Maugham, *Line on Ginger* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1949)

³²² S.14416

³²³ Ibid

to adjust to civilian life. At a regimental reunion, he meets up with his former second-in-command, George Hoskins (Richard Attenborough), who presents him with a business opportunity, purchasing their old boat and using it to smuggle wine, brandy and nylons, a venture in which they are joined by their former engineer Birdie (Bill Owen). However, they soon become involved, against the wishes of Randall and Birdie, with a crime syndicate based in London and in the more serious smuggling of forged banknotes, guns and even in the transportation of a child murderer. It is at this point that the boat seems to reveal its personality, expressing its disapproval of the crew's actions by refusing to work properly. Eventually, after the murder of a customs officer, the crew, fleeing to Spain, is unable to control the ship which appears consciously to crash itself on some rocks. The film ends with Randall recalling a promise he once made to his wife never to do anything stupid with the ship.

The film begins as a war film and ends as a gangster film, with the refitting of the 1087 and the re-assembling of the 'old team' for what begins as low-level smuggling marking the transition from the one genre to the other. As a war film *Ship* follows the documentary tradition with a genuine motor launch acquired and assistance provided by the Royal Navy.³²⁴ Given that the film shows former Royal Navy personnel becoming involved in serious crime such assistance is, as one writer has pointed out, surprising and can be explained only in terms of the way that the ship itself can be seen to represent the "wartime spirit and values".³²⁵

As a gangster film, the film has a thematic and visual darkness. Hoskins leads the group into a partnership with the villainous Fordyce (Roland Culver), a former Army major who has turned to crime because he resents his loss of status in post-war Britain. That Fordyce represents a departure from any form of "wartime spirit and values" can be seen when he declares that after having fought for 'the plebs' during the war he has no intention of working for them after it and concedes that there might be some truth

³²⁴ BFI Library, Michael Balcon Collection (H/178) *The Ship That Died of Shame* information folder

³²⁵ Mackenzie, *British War Films 1939-1945*, p. 148.

in the suggestion that he might have been fighting on the wrong side during the war. This partnership leads to serious crime and the increasing thematic darkness is accompanied by an increasing visual darkness, with what one writer has described as the 'pure darkness' of the wartime scenes set at sea at night-time being replaced by the 'sinister fog' of heavy, all-enveloping sea mists and the employment of other *film noir* techniques such as *chiaroscuro* lighting.³²⁶ In this respect, two scenes in particular stand out: the thick sea mist surrounding the ship as the child-killer is smuggled on board and Fordyce's shabby, semi-lit office where the industrious, dutiful customs officer (Bernard Lee), his medal ribbons displayed on his uniform, is gunned down by Fordyce who contemptuously describes him as one of 'these men of honour'. It is during this part of the film also that the scenes of violence that concerned the censors take place.³²⁷

Ship can be read both realistically and metaphorically. On a realistic level the film can be viewed as a damning critique of post-war British society squandering its inheritance.³²⁸ Here, Randall and Birdie, finding themselves part of 'the post-war masculine malaise of moral corrosion, greed and rudderless inability to adjust appropriately to peacetime circumstances' look back to the war years as a simpler and happier period of their lives and their growing unease with the crew's journey into serious crime is evidence that they retain some sense of right and wrong in a changing and confusing world.³²⁹ On a metaphorical level, as their sense of right and wrong has presumably been instilled in them during their time in the Royal Navy, their retention of some vestige of 'the remembered moral certainties of war service' causes them to view the ship as embodying such values.³³⁰ Thus Birdie feels 'it's not right' what they are 'doing' to the ship and Randall interprets the ship's mechanical failures as confirmation that what they are doing is wrong.

³²⁶ Jim Cook, 'The Ship That Died of Shame', in Charles Barr (editor) *All Our Yesterday*, pp. 362-7., pp. 364-5.

³²⁷ BFI Library, *The Ship That Died of Shame* information folder

³²⁸ Michael Relph interview (October 1989) in *An Autobiography of British Cinema* p. 482.

³²⁹ Burton and O'Sullivan, p. 176.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

Whereas *Intruder* makes the clear assertion that the “wartime spirit and values” still exist, here embodied in the character of Merton, *Ship*, rather, contends that it is possible only to identify some vestige of them in some people – Randall, Birdie and the customs officer – and in some institutions, the Royal Navy as embodied by the ship. This downward trajectory, from optimism to pessimism, continues with the final film in this brief cycle, *Tiger in the Smoke*.

A rather complicated tale, *Tiger* is set several years after the war and features a ‘bizarre band of street musicians’ that at first appears to be a group of disabled ex-servicemen, down on their luck, forced to beg for money and reliant on the charity of market traders for their accommodation, a subterranean storeroom, and for much of their food.³³¹ In fact, their injuries are largely faked and, despite an assertion in the press-book that they were ‘all war veterans’, the military background of all but two of the group, brothers who served together as commandos, is unclear.³³² Central to the story is a wartime raid, in which the two brothers had taken part, on a chateau in northern France that would have unintended consequences for the lives of those involved in it. The commanding officer, who was killed on the raid, had let slip that there was a chest containing priceless treasure somewhere in the grounds of the chateau and after the war the group cherishes a desire to find it. When the brothers’ former sergeant escapes from jail, the group attempts to restage the mission only to find that the treasure, a statue of the Virgin Mary, is priceless to believers but of little monetary value.

The film has, at best, a gloomy tone and delivers a pessimistic assessment regarding the survival of any wartime spirit and values: the men are pathetic wretches, unable to support themselves and lacking in purpose, and the sight of former servicemen begging on the streets of the capital suggests a nation that has abandoned its former

³³¹ BFI Library, Roy Ward Baker Collection RWB 1/13/3, *Tiger in the Smoke* small press-book (1956)

³³² press-book

heroes. The three characters that might have been relied upon to provide some sort of paternalistic support – the widow of the late commanding officer, Meg Elgin (Muriel Pavlow), her fiancé Geoffrey Leavitt (Donald Sinden), himself a former officer, and Meg’s clergyman father Canon Avril (Laurence Naismith) – are far more concerned with their own problems to offer anyone else any support. At times the film’s tone is menacing. The former sergeant, Jack Havoc (Tony Wright) – the name a clear reference to Antony’s reflections on the horror of war in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*: ‘Cry “Havoc” and let slip the dogs of war’ – is a psychopathic killer who was released from prison when awaiting trial for murder to take part in the raid and who is described in the director’s notes as the embodiment of evil.³³³ In words that recall those of Clem Morgan in *They Made Me a Fugitive*, Havoc recalls bitterly that his ability as a killer had once, during the war, made him a hero: ‘Then we used to get paid for it. Heroes we were.’ The sense of gloom, foreboding and menace is reinforced by the film’s often self-conscious *film noir* visual style. The studio-based streets are filled with a thick smog that even penetrates the buildings through open doors and windows and the underground haunt of the group is, on one occasion, seen partly illuminated from outside through the bars of a ventilation grid. In addition, several scenes feature flashing neon lights and jerky, erratic camera movements.

It is worthy of note that in the script the story begins with the commando raid as a pre-title sequence that did not make the final cut.³³⁴ A note on script changes refers to the omission of this scene but offers no explanation, its exclusion possibly an attempt to simplify the storyline or reduce costs.³³⁵ However, a more interesting explanation can be advanced: this scene would have almost certainly required military assistance – hardware such as boats and advice such as climbing techniques – of the sort granted to both *Intruder* and *Ship*. It is entirely plausible, given the film’s portrayal of former servicemen as either pathetic wretches or psychotic murderers, that military assistance was denied.

³³³ RWB 1/13/2, director’s notes

³³⁴ BFI Library, S.2775 *Tiger in the Smoke* final shooting script (16/5/56)

³³⁵ RWB 1/13/2

Viewing these three films as a short cycle it is possible to trace a clear downward trajectory, from optimism to pessimism, in terms of assertions regarding the survival of wartime values and the support available to former servicemen. The “Good Shepherd” of *Intruder* is absent from *Ship* but there remains a reminder of what has been lost in the form of the ship itself. In *Tiger* the group has all but been abandoned, not only by the military establishment, but also by society at large. These three films are also significant in that they feature British servicemen as anti-heroes: the arrogant and cowardly Pirry, the villainous Fordyce and the murderous Havoc. Although there is much thematic and visual darkness to be found in war-related films from the late 1940s, most of them end on something of an optimistic note and most former servicemen who turn to crime eventually see the error of their ways. Although Pirry is no hardened, murderous criminal, Fordyce and Havoc most certainly are.

It would certainly appear that cinema-goers preferred the optimism of *Intruder* to the pessimism of *Ship* and *Tiger*. *Intruder* was a major box-office success and this “U” certificate film might well have been viewed by family as well as adult audiences.³³⁶ As discussed previously, reviews would suggest that audiences had warmed in particular to Jack Hawkins in another role as the chivalrous military leader.³³⁷ Neither *Ship* nor *Tiger* made an impact at the box-office and their commercial failure might be attributed to plot deficiencies: there was some unease with *Ship*’s ‘fanciful’ story of ‘ships having souls’ and many critics found the storyline of *Tiger* confusing.³³⁸ However, it is also possible that dark tales of former servicemen drifting into crime without the redemptive quality of *Fugitive* and *Flamingo* - ‘wartime heroes to peacetime spivs’, ‘honourable wartime service to shoddy post-war smuggling’ – and a psychotic ex-serviceman – a ‘neurotic’ and ‘crazy ex-Commando sergeant who roams

³³⁶ *Kinematograph Weekly* 16 December 1954, *Kinematograph Weekly* 15 October 1953

³³⁷ *Daily Mirror* 16 October 1953, *Evening News* 15 October 1953, *Spectator* 16 October 1953, *Daily Mail* 16 October 1953

³³⁸ *Kinematograph Weekly* 15 December 1955, *Kinematograph Weekly* 13 December 1956, *Star* 21 April 1955, *Daily Mail* 21 April 1955, *Daily Mail* 23 November 1956; *Sunday Express* 25 November 1956; *Sunday Times* 25 November 1956; *Times* 26 November 1956; *Star* 20 November 1956; *Reynolds News* 25 November 1956; *Evening News* 22 November 1956; *Kinematograph Weekly* 22 November 1956

through [the London fog] to murder a series of victims' – had less appeal to audiences.³³⁹

The darkness, both thematic and visual, of *Ship* and *Tiger* can be seen as part of a movement away from the reassuring quality of war films from the early 1950s. 1956, the year the year in which *Tiger* was released, sees the emergence of a darker, more cynical treatment of the war that is evident in three other films from that year. The year saw the release of *The Man Who Never Was* (1956) a frequently ghoulish tale in which the dead body of a young man is used in an operation to deceive the Germans about Allied invasion plans that can be seen as the first of a cycle of special operations films – including *Count Five and Die*, *Orders to Kill*, *Circle of Deception* and *Foxhole in Cairo* (1960) – in which individuals are used as pawns to be sacrificed. Released also that year was *A Town like Alice* (1956), with its harrowing scenes of children dying for want of shelter, food and medicine and a prisoner being punished for theft by crucifixion, that sees the beginning of a cycle of films set in the Far East – including *Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), *The Camp on Blood Island* (1958) and *Yesterday's Enemy* (1959) – some of which show the brutality of war while others explore anti-war sentiments. In addition, 1956 saw the release of *Private's Progress* (1956), the first of a cycle of war comedies – including *The Square Peg* (1958), *The Night They Dropped a Clanger* (1958), *Operation Bullshine* (1959), *Desert Mice* (1959), and *Light Up the Sky* – that challenges, although affectionately, certain assumptions about the British at war.

6.2 Rebuilding a War-torn Continent: *The Divided Heart*

Although singled out by one writer as being 'of special interest' as a British film that deals with the 'immediate aftermath of war' and identified by another as a 'rare' example of a film showing 'compassion and concern for the victims of war', *The*

³³⁹ *Daily Mirror* 22 April 1955, *Times* 25 April 1955, *Daily Telegraph* 24 November 1956, *Star* 20 November 1956

Divided Heart has received little relatively attention.³⁴⁰ Set partly, through a series of flashbacks, during the war itself, the film tells the true story of a ten-year-old boy, adopted at the age of three and named Toni by a German couple who believed him to have been a German-born orphan, who discovers that his Yugoslavian birth-mother is still alive and is petitioning for his custody.

The story begins on the boy's tenth birthday with his party interrupted by representatives of the International Refugee Organisation, led by Marks (Geoffrey Keen), who inform his adoptive parents, Inga (Cornell Borchers) and Franz (Armin Dahlen), that they are trying to trace a Yugoslavian boy taken from his mother during the war. After an anxious wait, the couple learns that the case is to be decided by the American High Court in Germany. Here it is revealed through the testimony of the boy's birth-mother, Sonja Slavko (Yvonne Mitchell), that the boy, whom she calls Ivan, was taken from her as a baby by German soldiers before she herself was taken to Auschwitz and that prior to this her husband was shot for helping the partisans and her two daughters taken away. The testimony of the boy's adoptive mother reveals that he was adopted at the age of three and that she brought him up single-handedly before the return of her husband, who was believed to have been killed on the Eastern Front, several years after the end of the war. The court arranges for the birth-mother to visit her son and, after a difficult start, a relationship between them develops. Finally, the three parents return to the court where three judges each deliver their verdicts. By two votes to one it is decided that the boy should return to Yugoslavia with his birth-mother and the film ends with the boy travelling with her by train to his new home.

Made in the documentary tradition, *Divided Heart* is based on an actual case that was resolved in 1952: the three trials that took place being collapsed into one.³⁴¹ Producer Michael Balcon, director Charles Crichton and writer Jack Wittingham visited the locations where the boy had lived and spoke to the boy, his birth-mother, his adoptive

³⁴⁰ Manvell, p. 305., Jeavons, p. 200.

³⁴¹ BFI Library, *The Divided Heart* information folder, article by Charles Crichton "A Film About People"

parents and some of the judges and lawyers involved in the trial.³⁴² Some of the filming took place on location in Germany, Austria and Yugoslavia and the boy's adoptive parents are played by a German and an Austrian, leading one critic to declare that this made *Divided Heart* Ealing's first genuinely international film.³⁴³ It is clear from the director's reflections on the film that the film-makers were determined to achieve not only a factual authenticity but what might be termed an emotional realism as well: 'Our main problem ... was to create imaginatively the emotions of the two mothers and the boy who were at the centre of this tragic story and these are emotions which transcend all frontiers ... If we have shown them with truth and sincerity and with the dignity which is theirs, we have done what we set out to do.'³⁴⁴

Divided Heart is significant for two main reasons: it focuses on the impact of war on the civilian population and asserts optimistically that out of the chaos of post-war Europe order and justice can emerge. It is one of only three films – along with Gainsborough's *Portrait from Life* and *The Lost People* – to explore the disruptive effect of the Second World War on the lives of civilians on mainland Europe and one of only a small handful of films to make reference to the Holocaust. The pictorial background to the opening credits – a painting that includes a medieval battle scene, trenches behind barbed wire and a frightened-looking small boy clutching a teddy bear – suggests a film about the innocent victims of war and, significantly, *Divided Heart* focuses not only on the boy but also on the two mothers, both of whom are presented sympathetically. As one of several scripts states, *Divided Heart* 'is the story of the tragedy of the love of two mothers for the same little boy.'³⁴⁵

When first seen, Sonja 'appears dead inside her, full of hate and resentment', a woman for whom, as one character notes, 'the clock had stopped ... ten years ago'.³⁴⁶ In a series of flashbacks it is revealed that her joy at the birth of her third child, her son

³⁴² Ibid, BFI Library, *The Divided Heart* small press-book (1954)

³⁴³ Chrichton, *Manchester Guardian* 13 November 1954

³⁴⁴ Chrichton

³⁴⁵ BFI Library, S.783 *The Divided Heart* post-production script (n.d.)

³⁴⁶ Ibid

Ivan, is shattered when her husband is shot for assisting the partisans, her two daughters are taken away and later her son too before she is imprisoned in Auschwitz. A particularly striking scene, one of the most poignant in the film, sees her collapse to her knees as she learns that her daughters have been taken away: as several children run towards her telling her of the terrible news that the audience has already witnessed, the camera moves away from her so that her collapse into grief and despair is seen, in silence, from a distance as if the camera and the audience have no right to intrude. Years later Sonja struggles to understand how the baby she once held has grown into a ten-year old boy who does not know her and she is stung by his rejection of her. Finding no solace in the village church, she faces the hostility and intimidation of the local children who, seeing her as an outsider, attempt to drive her away by throwing snowballs at her. It is at this point that her son first shows evidence of a bond with his mother as he tries to protect her.

Inga too is shown to be a victim. It is revealed that she had to choose between two young boys at the orphanage and her choice of the nervous and temperamental Toni over the other more endearing child establishes her as 'warm and loving' and reinforces her devotion to her adopted son.³⁴⁷ Bringing him up single-handedly she is shown to have helped him recover from the effects of traumatic experiences in his past, manifested in a fear of military uniform and her contribution to the boy's well-being is applauded when Marks explains to the court: 'Your Honour, there is a gap of two years in the child's life before he came to the orphanage about which we know nothing. He may have seen bitter fighting, violence, destruction from the day he was taken from his mother, by men in uniform.' Inga's calm confidence, seen briefly at the beginning of the film, deserts her after Marks' first visit, leaving her constantly on edge as she nervously awaits any official correspondence. Later, she is either short-tempered or tearful, at one-point despairing as to whether the war will ever end.

³⁴⁷ Ibid

As well as exploring the impact of the war on its innocent victims, the film appears to suggest, largely through the character of Marks, that it is possible both to construct order out of the chaos left by war and to resolve some of the injustices suffered during the years of conflict. Marks has an unshakeable faith in the ability of the court to reach the right decision and argues in favour of procedure over emotion. When Franz suggests that he is operating more like a machine than a man, he declares: 'It's taken me years to learn ... how to be a useful part of the machine. A man here would be useless: he would drown in the tears.' Indeed, the power of Marks' faith can be seen in the way the boy's adoptive parents eventually come to share his belief that only the court can decide the matter fairly. Franz responds to Inga's suggestion that they could run away by declaring that the situation is now out of their hands and later Inga concludes that only a higher authority can decide the boy's future when she learns that Sonja intends to return to Yugoslavia without her son because she feels that her reappearance in his life has caused him too much distress.

The film proved unsuccessful at the box-office despite a generally warm response from the press – with the popular press praising a film that had moved audiences to tears without being mawkish, and the quality press welcoming the film's sincerity and restraint – and predictions that it would appeal to family and female audiences in particular.³⁴⁸ The film's producer Michael Balcon would later describe *Divided Heart* as an outstanding film but reflected that its subject matter did not make for box-office success.³⁴⁹ In view of the earlier commercial failure of *Portrait from Life* and *The Lost People*, it would indeed appear that stories of the plight of non-British civilians had little appeal for British cinema audiences.

³⁴⁸ *Kinematograph Weekly* 16 December 1954, *Daily Sketch* 10 November 1954, *Sunday Despatch* 14 November 1954, *Daily Mirror* 12 November 1954, *Daily Express* 11 November 1954, *News Chronicle* 12 November 1954, *Star* 12 November 1954, *Observer* 14 November 1954, *Financial Times* 15 November 1954, *Evening Standard* 11 November 1954, *Time and Tide* 20 November 1954, *Manchester Guardian* 13 November 1954, *Today's Cinema* 10 November 1954, *Monthly Film Bulletin* December 1954, *Daily Mirror* 12 November 1954

³⁴⁹ Balcon, pp. 180-181.

Conclusion

The Intruder apart, the war-related films of this period did not prove popular with audiences and, despite some critical interest by virtue of the directors involved, have fallen outside of any canon of British war films. However, these films are evidence that, alongside the tributes to the British people at war, British cinema was exploring other themes and topics during the early 1950s.

Part 2 Conclusion

This section has shown that the defining feature of the combat-oriented films from the first half of the 1950s is their emphasis on paying tribute to the men and women who fought and died during the war. This is frequently apparent from the start, with an opening dedication and it is often confirmed with a closing dedication. It is also apparent from the film-makers' attempts to ensure veracity – characters and storylines based on real, or at least realistic, people and events; authenticity of military detail in terms of equipment and procedure, often with the assistance of serving members and/or veterans of the armed forces – all of which contribute to the documentary feel of war films from this period. It can also be seen in the creation of idealised hero figures, chivalric heroes whose embodiment of qualities such as decency, compassion and honesty can be seen in their selfless devotion to duty and their deep concern for the lives and well-being of those under their command. It is clear that these films were extremely popular with audiences that were very inclusive in terms of age, social class and gender and reviews suggest that the element of tribute was an important part of the films' appeal. Indeed, as audiences for earlier representations of the war were somewhat fragmented in terms of age, gender and class, films of this period could be said to see the cinema-going public united in paying tribute to the nation at war. As such, this section, while conceding that tales of heroism might help to salve national pride wounded by the country's declining world influence, argues that these films cannot be dismissed as escapist nostalgia.

This section has shown too that, although there are few examples of films that depict the war as brutal and, arguably, only one example of a film that could be described as exploring the ethics of war, films of this period cannot be accused of glamorising war, ignoring the suffering that war brings or of demonising the enemy. Indeed, it has been argued that the restrained treatment of war that is characteristic of this period would have had a deep emotional realism and resonance that might be underestimated by present-day viewers of these films.

Lastly, it has been shown that, despite the dominance of combat-oriented war films over war-related films, there is evidence of the British cinema at this time producing war-related films that present a very different picture of the conflict and its aftermath. A brief cycle – *The Intruder*, *The Ship That Died of Shame*, *Tiger in the Smoke* – makes conflicting, and increasingly pessimistic, assertions regarding the post-war survival of “wartime values” and the continued existence of a “wartime spirit”. In addition, *The Divided Heart* provides a very rare example, unique for the first half of the 1950s, of a film that explores the lasting impact of the Second World War on civilians.

This section has started the process of challenging the view that British war films of the 1950s are largely homogenous in their representations of the Second World War. Indeed, as will be seen in the following section, focussing on films from the first half of the decade – with their gentlemanly commanding officers, their insistence on authenticity and their general avoidance of depictions brutality and any exploration of the ethics of war – emphasises the contrast with films from the second half of the decade with their harder, more cynical commanding officers, their depictions of the horrors of war, their explorations of the ethics of war and their taking of greater liberties in terms of their authenticity of storyline.

Part 3: A Time of Reflection: Depictions of the Brutality of War, Explorations of the Ethics of War and Less-idealised Depictions of the British at War, 1956-1960

Introduction

Several writers have suggested that some sort of change occurred in the nature of war films at some point during the second half of the 1950s. However, none of these accounts is particularly specific about which films can be said to constitute this change of mood and are somewhat vague as to just when this change takes place. Durnat talks of films moving in three different directions – colourful epics and militarism vying with an anti-war sentiment – but gives few examples to illustrate his assertion.³⁵⁰

Likewise, Jeavons' and Murphy's assertion that by the end of the decade war films had taken on a harsher and more cynical tone are not fully developed, nor indeed does Ramsden fully explain how the 'seeds of subversion' he identifies in war comedies come to fruition.³⁵¹ Only Havardi, although viewing the films that constitute change as something of an aberration, is specific in viewing this change as part of a post-Suez abandonment of deference towards its leaders on the part of the British people.³⁵²

This section argues that there was indeed a change in the nature of representations of the Second World War in films from the second half of the decade and that, moreover, this change is sufficiently significant to justify treating the period as a third distinctive phase in the development of representations of the Second World War during the period 1946 to 1960. It is argued that the change in the nature of representations of can be dated as early as 1956 as this year sees the release of *The Man Who Never Was* and *A Town Like Alice*, two films that can be seen to usher in a cycle of films that depict the brutality and explore the ethics of war, along with the release of *Private's Progress*, a film that can be seen to herald a less deferential depiction of the British at war. In addition, 1956 also sees the release of *Tiger in the Smoke*, discussed in the previous

³⁵⁰ Durnat, p. 84.

³⁵¹ Jeavons, p. 203.; Murphy *British Cinema and the Second World War*, p. 7.; Ramsden, 'Refocusing the People's War', p. 60.

³⁵² Havardi, p. 158.

section, a film that presents a wholly pessimistic view of the survival of what might be termed the spirit of the Blitz.

This section is divided into five chapters. The first (chapter 7) examines a group of films that present the war as brutal and explore the ethics of war in a way not seen earlier in the decade and also considers whether any of these films could be described as anti-war. The second (chapter 8) looks at war comedies and considers the extent to which these films could be described as subversive in their depictions of the British at war. The third (chapter 9) examines a group of films that present a far less idealised picture of the British Serviceman when compared to earlier films and considers whether these films could be described as a direct challenge to previous assumptions regarding the British at war. The fourth (chapter 10) examines a group of films that can be seen to herald the abandonment of the requirement that war films be authentic, although it is clear that film makers were at pains to reassure audiences of their veracity. The final chapter of this section (chapter 11) examines a number of films that represent continuity, rather than change, with regard to films from the first half of the decade and considers whether the popularity of some of these films has obscured the change in the nature of war films between the first and second halves of the decade. Once the issues raised above have been discussed, specific consideration will be given to the assertions made by Durnat, Jeavons, Murphy, Ramsden and Harvardi.

Chapter 7 –Depictions of the Brutality of War and Explorations of the Ethics of War

Introduction

Those who assert that British war films underplay the horror of war might have a point if they focus solely on the early 1950s.³⁵³ However, such an assertion cannot hold for the second half of the decade which sees the release of a number of films that show the horror and brutality of war, some of which explore its ethical dilemmas. As one writer has pointed out, these films are set in two theatres of war – the Far East and the work of Military Intelligence in occupied Europe.³⁵⁴ Significantly, both cycles begin in 1956: *A Town Like Alice* sees the beginning of a Far East cycle that includes *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, *The Camp on Blood Island* and *Yesterdays Enemy*, while *The Man Who Never Was* sees the start of a military intelligence cycle that includes *Count Five and Die*, *Orders to Kill*, *Foxhole in Cairo* and *Circle of Deception*.

This chapter will focus firstly on the content of the films, showing both that their depictions of war are much harsher than those released during the first half of the decade and that some of them clearly engage with a discussion of the ethics of war, arguably suggesting that war is senseless. Secondly, consideration will also be given to the popularity of the films, the possible characteristics of the audiences that watched them and aspects of the film that might have appealed to audiences. Having done this, tentative conclusions will be reached regarding the sort of war and war-related films British cinema audiences enjoyed.

As a film that suggests war is senseless might reasonably be described as an anti-war film it is necessary to establish how the term is to be employed. Following Chapman, an anti-war film can be understood as ‘one that expresses ... the idea of war as a moral tragedy and a waste of human lives’, a definition that allows the term “pacifist film” to be reserved for films that assert that war is always wrong.³⁵⁵ However, a distinctive

³⁵³ Anderson, pp. 236-7. Armes, pp. 177-8.

³⁵⁴ Pronay, pp. 46-51

³⁵⁵ Chapman, *War and Film*, p. 117

feature of post-war British Second World War films is that it is difficult to employ the term anti-war film without reservation, even to those films that clearly seek to explore the ethics of war, as they also contain tributes to the heroism of those who took part in the war along with elements of the war-adventure film such as scenes of action and spectacle. Durnat talked of films released later in the decade that were, if not anti-war, then 'pretty discouraging about it', but as this is something of a mouthful it would seem appropriate to borrow Medhurst's term, used in relation to *The Cruel Sea*, and to refer to films as making something of 'an anti-war statement'.³⁵⁶

7.1 A Brutal War I: The Far East – *A Town like Alice* and *The Camp on Blood Island*

The war against Japan features little in British post-war cinema until the second half of the 1950s. However, the wartime experiences of traumatised pilots in *Mine Own Executioner* and *Purple Plain* establishes an early association of the war in the Far East with mental trauma and anticipates the way in which later films set there would present war as brutal and also explore the ethics of war.

A Town like Alice is, unusually for British cinema, concerned with civilians in war. A group of women and children is forced to trek miles through Japanese-occupied Malaya in search of the relative security of a prison camp following the surrender of Singapore with the film focusing on a young woman, Jean Pagett (Virginia McKenna), who is left to look after three children when their mother dies. Until this point, scenes showing the suffering of civilians – for example the smoking city in *Cruel Sea* and the burning bus in *Malta Story* – had been rare in British cinema, taking up only a small proportion of each film and, significantly, shot at a distance, but in *Alice* the camera is kept close to the women and children throughout their ordeal. Some of the women and most of the children die during their seemingly endless trek – often from a combination of malnutrition and disease – and there are scenes of mothers desperately nursing their sick children that are followed by scenes of mothers and

³⁵⁶ Durnat, p. 84. Medhurst, p. 36

siblings mourning a child's loss with shots of makeshift crosses marking their graves. Additionally, in arguably the film's most dramatic scene, an Australian prisoner from the men's camp is punished by crucifixion for stealing chickens in order that the women and children can eat.

The film enjoyed major box-office success and would appear to have been seen by fairly inclusive audiences: it carried an "A" certificate but was considered suitable for adolescents as well as adults, it was described as having 'women's appeal' and was recommended 'for all popular exhibitors'.³⁵⁷ Publicity material suggests that the film's producers wanted the film to be seen as an exploration of human courage in the face of adversity – a 'story of endurance and tenacious courage' about 'the human capacity for the sudden strengthening of the mind and body in the face of disaster' – rather than, as would be the case in *The Camp on Blood Island*, an exposition of the brutality of the Japanese, and the comments of one critic that the film was 'a tribute to human endurance against man's inhumanity to women and children' suggests it might have been viewed as such by audiences.³⁵⁸ Critical reaction also suggests that audiences were moved rather than shocked by the film. While many critics used the words 'harrowing' and 'moving' to describe the film – with one confessing that they were unable to keep their eyes on the screen during the crucifixion scene and another predicting it would move audiences to tears – it was also described as 'grim but well handled', with one critic declaring 'we can be grateful for understatement' and another praising the director 'for the savageries [the film] doesn't show'.³⁵⁹

Although similarly presenting the war in the Far East as brutal, *The Camp on Blood Island* leaves audiences in no doubt that the source of brutality is the Japanese military. Described in an opening caption as 'not just a story' but 'based on the brutal truth', the film tells the story of an uprising of Allied prisoners against their brutal

³⁵⁷ *Kinematograph Weekly* 13 December 1956, *Monthly Film Bulletin* April 1956, *Today's Cinema* 27 February 1956

³⁵⁸ *A Town Like Alice* small press-book (1956), *Daily Mail* 2 March 1956

³⁵⁹ *Guardian* 3 March 1956, *Observer* 4 March 1956, *Tribune* 9 March 1956, *Daily Herald* 2 March 1956, *Daily Express* 3 March 1956, *Daily Mirror* 2 March 1956, *Financial Times* 5 March 1956

captors in the days following the Japanese surrender. Beginning with the execution of a prisoner, the film proceeds to catalogue a series of prisoner abuses: beatings, refusing medical supplies, withholding and burning mail. Furthermore, insanitary conditions in both the men's and women's camps result in high rates of mortality and, in arguably the film's most iconic scene – used as the inspiration for the film posters – several prisoners are beheaded following a prisoner escape. In addition, the camp's commandant, Yamamitsu, has threatened to kill every prisoner in the event of a Japanese surrender and his second-in-command delights in tormenting prisoners. When the Allied prisoners, armed with improvised weapons, rise up against the camp guards – having learned, ahead of their captors, of the Japanese surrender – no mercy is shown for their former tormentors. The film asserts clearly through the character of Cyril Beattie (Walter Fitzgerald) that there is nothing to be gained by dialogue with the Japanese. Beattie, a former civilian diplomat, spends much of the film advocating dialogue with Yamamitsu and is a fierce critic of the actions – encouraging escape attempts and the sabotaging of Japanese radio equipment – of the Senior British Officer (Carl Mohne), at one point suggesting they all throw themselves on the 'mercy' of the commandant. However, following the death of his wife, Beattie finally concludes that Yamamitsu must be killed, a task he carries out himself in a suicide attack that heralds the uprising.

Although the script acknowledges that the events and characters are fictitious, the film's producers were keen to emphasise the veracity of the depictions of Japanese brutality.³⁶⁰ The film programme includes words from Lord Russell of Liverpool, the author of "The Knights of Bushido", vouching 'for the authenticity of the factual background against which the dramatic story of this fine film is told', accompanied by the assertion: '[I]t is only by remembering the past that we may be able to secure the future.'³⁶¹ In addition, a statement by a former Japanese prisoner-of-war attests to the film's 'honesty and accuracy' and the film's producer speaks of recording and exposing

³⁶⁰ BFI Library S.13975 *The Camp on Blood Island* shooting script, (n.d.)

³⁶¹ BFI Library, Film Programmes Collection, *The Camp on Blood Island* film programme (1958)

‘the brutal truth about what really happened to thousands of Allied men and women who were unfortunate enough to fall into Japanese hands.’³⁶²

However, despite such assurances of authenticity, many critics, and not only those of the quality press, were shocked by the film’s depiction of brutality: *Reynolds News* described it as ‘the most shameful and destructive picture of the year’ and called for it to be banned; the *Daily Sketch* critic considered it ‘the most sadistic, most horrible war film’ they had ever sat through; the *Sunday Dispatch* declared it ‘one of the nastiest pictures ever made in Britain’ and the *Observer* denounced it as an ‘abomination’.³⁶³ Indeed, there was outrage at the perceived commercial exploitation of the nation’s experience of war. The *Evening Standard*’s critic described it as ‘the first British film to exploit atrocities for their entertainment value’, several others condemned its cynical appeal to the box-office and the *Daily Express* declared: ‘It uses the background of war and the suffering of the men who were made prisoners in the Far East as the excuse to sell sadism, torture, brutishness, bestiality and horrid sensationalism to the customers at the local cinema.’³⁶⁴ However, the trade press applauded its ‘showmanship’ and predicted its appeal for ‘general showing’ to adult audiences and the film proved a major box-office success with audiences that were – given that the film was, uniquely among British war and war-related films of the 1940s and 1950s, awarded an “X” certificate – made up of people of 16 years of age and older.³⁶⁵

Both films are evidence of a much harsher depiction of war in films from the second half of the decade, yet with their focus on the courage and tenacity of women and children in time of war and the brutality of the Japanese, neither can be considered an anti-war film. Significantly, the popularity of both films suggests that British cinema audiences were comfortable with harsher depictions of war.

³⁶² Ibid

³⁶³ *Reynolds News* 20 April 1958, *Daily Sketch* 18 April 1958, *Sunday Dispatch* 20 April 1958, *Observer* 20 April 1958

³⁶⁴ *Evening Standard* 17 April 1958, *Sunday Pictorial* 20 April 1958, *Daily Herald* 18 April 1958, *Sunday Express* 20 April 1958, *Daily Express* 18 April 1958

³⁶⁵ *Kinematograph Weekly* 17 April 1958, *Daily Cinema* 11 April 1958, *Kinematograph Weekly* 18 December 1958

7.2 A Brutal War II: The World of Military Intelligence – *The Man Who Never Was*, *Count Five and Die*, *Foxhole in Cairo*, *Circle of Deception* and *Carve Her Name with Pride*

Both *Angels One Five* and *Malta Story* end, poignantly, with a woman grieving the loss of a young pilot. In both films the young men who died were aware of the dangers they faced and the risk that they would lose their lives, and their deaths are presented as examples of courageous self-sacrifice, entirely in keeping with the more idealised depictions of war to be found in the early 1950s. In three films set in the world of Secret Intelligence and released between 1957 and 1960 – *Count Five and Die*, *Foxhole in Cairo* and *Circle of Deception* – this idealised depiction of war in which young men sacrifice their own lives is replaced by one in which a much more ruthless brand of military leader recruits volunteers who believe they are engaged in dangerous but achievable missions whereas they are actually being used as part of elaborate deceptions in which their deaths are vital to the mission's success.

This cycle can be seen to be anticipated by *The Man Who Never Was*, based on the true story of how, in "Operation Mincemeat", British Intelligence convinced the Germans that the Allied invasion of southern Europe would be through Greece rather than Sicily by means of arranging for a dead body to be found, washed up on the Spanish coast, that would be believed to be that of a British officer carrying secret papers. Although this plan is a less gruesome version of an earlier idea involving documents being carried by an operative whose parachute is tampered with so that it fails to open, the extent to which the use of a dead body in such a deception amounts to a crossing of a line between a gentlemanly and a dirty war – both for the character of Admiral Cross (Laurence Naismith) and for British cinema in that it anticipates films featuring the use of living people – can be seen in Cross's reaction, both condemning and applauding the idea when it is first suggested to him:

In over thirty years of intelligence work I've never heard anything like it. It's the most outrageous, disgusting, preposterous, not to say barbaric, idea. But work out full details and be on hand at the War Cabinet offices at four-thirty tomorrow.

The film has a thematic and visual darkness not seen in a combat-oriented British war film since *Against the Wind* in 1948. Shots of semi-lit rooms, stairwells and lifts convey a sense of menace and anxiety and there is a particular ghouliness to the scene in the mortuary where the body is prepared – an electric flex is tied up so it resembles a noose and screams can be heard clearly during a bombing raid – and a black humour peppers the film as, for example, when two Intelligence officers speculate as to whether a damaged Mosquito returning to base will offer up the dead body they need. Furthermore, the traumatised Lucy (Gloria Grahame) grieving for her fiancé, a RAF pilot, becomes part of the deception when an enemy agent is sent to establish whether the girl in the picture found in the wallet of the dead officer really is mourning the loss of her fiancé.

The idea of using not dead bodies but living people as pawns in a deception can first be seen in *Count Five and Die* in which two agents are dropped into occupied Holland – their superior officer, Major Howard (Nigel Patrick), knowing that they will almost certainly be captured, tortured and, after breaking down and talking, killed – in order to deceive the Germans into thinking that the Allied invasion will take place through Holland. Howard is the epitome of a commanding officer who understands that he is fighting not a gentlemanly but a brutal and merciless war. In sending the two agents to their deaths Howard even denies them lethal pills – which, having swallowed them, agents need only 'count five and die' – to ensure that they provide the Germans with false but seemingly credible information. Later, Howard concludes in a matter-of-fact way that as they have not heard from either agent they can be certain that the underground group to which they were sent has been infiltrated. On another occasion, Howard apprehends a German agent who starts to declare his name and rank and coolly informs him: 'The Geneva Convention does not apply to you ... to either of us in

fact.’ Howard allows himself to trust no-one and has no regard for agents’ sensitivities, revealing to two agents that he has taped them in bed together.

Like *Man Who Never Was* the film employs, often self-consciously, a *film noir* visual style with darkened offices partly illuminated from outside through venetian blinds and swirling cigarette smoke in a semi-lit bedroom. Additionally, the film features a *femme-fatale* as a Mata Hari-style double agent who sleeps with an agent in order to convince him she is a genuine member of the Dutch Resistance.

The cycle continues with *Foxhole in Cairo* in which the weaknesses of a British Intelligence officer – alcoholism and his infatuation with an Egyptian night-club dancer – are exploited not only by the Germans but also by the British. Aware that the Germans have managed to place agents in Cairo in order to discover where the Allies will concentrate their defences against Rommel’s *Afrika Korps*, Captain Robertson (James Robertson Justice) charges Major Jimmy Wilson (Robert Urquhart) with the task of delivering what Wilson believes are top secret documents regarding Allied plans, knowing that these false documents will fall into enemy hands and that Wilson will likely be killed, as indeed he is. Like Howard, Robertson has little compunction in sending one of his own men to his death. Unlike the other films in this cycle, expressionist/*film noir* visual effects are absent but there is additional thematic darkness with hints of brutal interrogation techniques used by the British and suggestions that female agents are using their bodies rather than their brains in intelligence gathering.

Completing the cycle, *Circle of Deception* features a volunteer for hazardous duties, Paul Raine (Bradford Dillman), who is selected because it is believed that having been captured he will break under pressure and talk, but only after having resisted for long enough that the Germans will believe that the false information they have extracted from him is genuine. This particular deception is engineered by Captain Rawson (Harry

Andrews), a man who, like Howard and Robertson, is under no illusions that he is fighting a gentlemanly war. At their first meeting when Raine apologises for his 'dirty' uniform, Rawson replies curtly: 'It's a dirty war, Raine.' Rawson, who believes that in war 'we've got to be cheats and liars', is clear that he will be sending a brave man to his death and that the unsuspecting agent's ultimately futile attempt not to talk is essential to the success of the plan: 'He won't know he's a phoney. He'll really believe he's got vital information. He'll try his hardest not to talk and then things will get tough for him. He won't be able to take it and he will talk.' In a variation on *Count Five and Die*, Raine is issued with a fake lethal pill, as it is essential to the plan that he does not end his life before he breaks under pressure.

The film also explores the psychological impact on Raine of his experiences. Having been captured and tortured, he attempts to take his own life by swallowing what he believes to be a lethal pill, but talks when it fails to work and his resolve breaks. When, before his interrogators get around to finishing him off, he is rescued by the French Resistance he is left ignorant of the fact that he has played his part in a successful deception and wracked with guilt for having, he believes, sent comrades to their deaths. As a result, Raine turns to drink and is first seen as a shamed and broken man living a reclusive life in North Africa. The film also employs an expressionist/*film noir* visual style. Raine's run-down apartment in North Africa is semi-lit and venetian blinds cast shadows on the walls and similar lighting techniques are used during the scenes of Raine's interrogation with the bars on the cell door casting shadows on the walls and ceilings. Additionally, the dark glasses of the blind interrogator add further menace to the proceedings.

This cycle of films presents a very different picture of the British at war from that presented in films from the first half of the decade. Characters such as Howard, Robertson and Rawson are hard-bitten, cynical and quite capable of balancing the lives of the few against the lives of the many in a cool and detached manner, a ruthlessness that distinguishes them from characters such as Ericson, Fraser and Mason, all of

whom show great concern for the lives of those affected by their actions. In terms of cinematic depictions of masculinity, these ruthless leaders clearly represent a departure from the chivalric hero and it is tempting to see them as an incarnation of Spicer's 'damaged men', their adherence to the chivalric code compromised by their experience of war.³⁶⁶ However, a psychological assessment of *Circle of Deception*'s Rawson, one which the character himself describes as 'first rate', is instructive as it suggests that Rawson was selected on account of his possession of certain innate characteristics rather than these characteristics having been acquired by the brutalising process of war: 'A courageous and forceful character, but cold, calculating and with a marked and dangerous absence of scruple. Highly intelligent, but with an underlying, rather childish vanity. More a driver than a leader. Could be a valuable person in some positions, but unlikely to inspire deep affection or trust.' As neither Howard nor Robertson exhibit any sign of struggling with the demand of their job, it seems reasonable to conclude that they too are examples of a new breed of ruthless and detached military leader, capable of giving as good, or perhaps as bad, as they get.

It is significant that, despite their differences from earlier hero figures, none of the films suggests that any of these characters are in any way anti-heroes, let alone villains. Indeed, each film presents the case for fighting a less gentlemanly, even brutal war. For example, Rawson responds to the accusation that his use of Raine is not 'fair' with the words: 'Fair? Fair? What do you think war is? A game of tennis? Is it fair to plan an attack knowing a lot of your men are going to be killed? If you're going to win a war then attacks have to be made and somebody has to take the responsibility for planning them.' Furthermore, each film ends with a clear assertion that the ends justify the means. In *Man That Never Was* maps are used to illustrate the movement of German troops away from Sicily, in *Circle of Deception* reference is made to the desired troop redeployment, a caption in *Foxhole in Cairo* indicates the location of the actual engagement, at El Alamein, and a closing caption in *Count Five and Die* informs audiences that: 'When the Allied armies hit the beaches of Normandy on June 6th

³⁶⁶ Andrew Spicer, *Typical Men*, pp. 26-7.

1944, ten German divisions were not in the line. They were north in Holland, waiting for an invasion that never came.'

In a number of respects, *Carve Her Name with Pride* stands apart from the other Military Intelligence films of this period. The commanding officers – Maurice Buckmaster, former Head of F Section SOE, and Vera Atkins, also of F Section SOE – who send Violette Szabo (Virginia McKenna) into occupied France are, in their concern for their agents, unlike Howard, Rawson and Robertson. Before Violette is recruited Atkins informs her that her military service might 'end the same way' as that of her husband, killed in North Africa, and before her second and final mission Buckmaster makes clear that she has 'every right to say "no"'. Not only is Violette made fully aware of the risks, she is also offered, although she refuses, a lethal tablet. In addition, for much of the time there is little thematic or visual darkness and the film includes a curious mix of genres: romance, including a memorable love poem; comic moments during the agents' training and aspects of family melodrama. However, when the injured and bloodied Violette is captured the film darkens both thematically and visually. Violette's prison cell is seen in semi-darkness with the window bars casting a shadow against the wall below which, on one occasion, Violette and her fellow prisoners are heard, although not seen, sobbing. Furthermore, after Violette has been tortured by a henchman whose face is not revealed – there are here subtle hints of sexual violence – a prolonged interrogation session takes place in which the faces of her interrogators are seen in semi-darkness as a desk-lamp is shone directly into her face. Later, Violette, along with her comrades, is executed 'by order of the Fuehrer'. As the pictured machine gun is heard to fire, the film cuts to a barbed-wire fence topped by clouds, as if the events taking place are too awful to be seen. Although the film has its lighter moments, this section of the film is as harrowing as any cinematic depiction of the war and can be viewed as a return to the sort of darkness seen in earlier films such as *Against the Wind* and *Odette*. Indeed, the film's director, like that of *Odette*, would later reflect on the trauma that filming such scenes had on his starring actor.³⁶⁷

³⁶⁷ Gilbert, pp. 181-2. Wilcox, p.183.

This group of films proved reasonably popular with audiences with all except *Count Five and Die*, probably a supporting feature, and *Circle of Deception* achieving major box-office success.³⁶⁸ Audiences for *Count Five and Die*, *Foxhole in Cairo* and *Circle of Deception*, all awarded an “A” certificate, were likely made up of adults and adolescents, while *The Man Who Never Was* and *Carve Her Name with Pride*, recommended for general audiences and somewhat surprisingly awarded “U” certificates and considered suitable for family audiences, possibly owing to the former’s lack of actual violence and the latter’s inclusion of family melodrama, would likely have been seen by a wider and slightly younger audience.³⁶⁹ Although it would appear that audiences were comfortable with harsher depictions of war, the commercial success of only one film to feature one of the new breed of military leaders, *Foxhole in Cairo*, suggests that audiences had yet to embrace such characters.³⁷⁰

7.3 Exploring the Ethics of War I: The Far East – *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and *Yesterday’s Enemy*

In addition to its exploration of the ethics of war *The Bridge on the River Kwai* is significant for its incorporation of a central character who is anything but a conventional hero. The film tells the story of a Senior British Officer in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp, Colonel Nicholson (Alec Guinness), who, in order to promote order and discipline among his troops, orders his men to collaborate with the Japanese commandant, Saito (Sessue Hayakawa), in the building of a bridge that forms part of the Siam-Burma railway. Unsurprisingly, the film attracted hostility from former prisoners of the Japanese long before its release. Hearing that the French novel “Le Pont de la Riviere Kwai” was to be filmed by a British company, officials of the

³⁶⁸ *Kinematograph Weekly* 13 December 1956, *Kinematograph Weekly* 12 December 1957, *Kinematograph Weekly* 18 December 1958, *Kinematograph Weekly* 15 December 1960, *Kinematograph Weekly* 14 December 1961

³⁶⁹ *Monthly Film Bulletin* February 1958, *Monthly Film Bulletin* November 1960, *Kinematograph Weekly* 1 December 1960, *Monthly Film Bulletin* March 1956, *Today’s Cinema* 9 February 1956, *Kinematograph Weekly* 20 February 1958, *Daily Cinema* 17 February 1958

³⁷⁰ *Kinematograph Weekly* 15 December 1960

veterans' group the Burma Star Association expressed their concern, arguing that British soldiers would never have done anything to help the Japanese war effort, with one pointing out that the story was 'both unreal and contrary to the duty of prisoners-of-war' and another suggesting words for inclusion at the beginning of the film stating that the storyline had 'no foundation in fact and would have been contrary to the high standards of duty and loyalty maintained by the British troops who were forced to work as prisoners-of-war on the Siam-Burma railway.'³⁷¹ The War Office too was clearly unhappy about a film that would show the British Army in a 'bad light' and would be 'badly received' by former prisoners of the Japanese.³⁷² Indeed, officials felt the character of Nicholson, who conformed to 'the American idea of a typical wooden-headed British Army officer' was at best 'half-mad' and at worst a 'collaborationist'.³⁷³ However, although keen to reassure concerned parties that it had played no part in the making of the film, the War Office was, in the wake of *Private's Progress*, keenly aware of its declining influence over the content of British war films:

We did not give any assistance in the production of the film and could not have done so even if we had wished, as it was made in Ceylon. In fact we did try to get the company to change the script but were unsuccessful ... If we had objected it could not have prevented the film being made and might have given it undue publicity – as indeed happened in the case of a recent film made by the Boulting Brothers.³⁷⁴

The film certainly shows the war to be brutal: early scenes show the burial of yet more prisoners; the camp hospital is filled with men dying of disease and malnutrition and many of the new arrivals at the camp appear to be in a state of near-exhaustion. However, the film's key significance is in its exploration of the ethics of war. Both Nicholson and the Japanese commandant Saito are tied to codes of military honour that allow for no dialogue between them and Nicholson's belief in the primacy of the discipline of his men leads him to order his men to collaborate with the Japanese in the construction of a bridge that will help the Japanese war effort. In addition, the

³⁷¹ National Archive, WO 32/16027 Facilities for Film "Bridge on the River Kwai" Horizon Pictures (GB) Ltd

³⁷² Ibid.

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

destruction of the bridge at the end of the film can be read as an assertion that war is ultimately futile, a reading supported by the final utterances of the Major Clifton – the medical officer who, as a non-combatant, enjoys greater freedom to comment on what he sees around him – who declares that it is all ‘Madness! Madness!’

One writer has identified an ‘ambivalence’ in the film’s main message and another has suggested that ‘it pretends to be pacifist, but isn’t’ while at the same time conceding that the film is ‘effective in introducing a certain, probably healthy, unease into everyone’s thinking about war’.³⁷⁵ This ambivalence is the result of the film’s both exploring the ethics of war and containing sufficient elements of the war-adventure film ‘to appeal to popular audiences’: Allied prisoners enduring the extreme hardships of the camp with fortitude; a special-forces training camp, a night-time parachute drop, a long and hazardous route march and finally the spectacle of the destruction of the bridge.³⁷⁶

These conflicting messages can be explained in part by the film’s eventful production history. Frequent changes in script and, indeed, script-writer appear to have reduced the clarity of authorial voice that would be needed if the film were to make an unambiguous anti-war statement. Carl Foreman’s original script was thought by Lean to be overly melodramatic and his replacement Michael Wilson is said to have wanted to use the script to condemn ‘the madness of military types ... who lose all human perspective in a war’.³⁷⁷ Lean’s letters and notes suggest that he too wanted the film to explore the ethics of war with the relationship between Nicholson and Saito occupying centre stage, at one point complaining that the commando raid, included in earlier versions of the script at the beginning of the film, was a distraction from this.³⁷⁸ On another occasion he recorded his unhappiness with the way that the ‘complex

³⁷⁵ Manvell, p. 324; Durnat, pp. 87-8

³⁷⁶ Constantine Santos, *The Films of David Lean* (London: Scarecrow Press, 2012), p. 2.

³⁷⁷ Kevin Brownlow, *David Lean: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), pp. 345-359.; Larry Ceplair, ‘A Marxist in Hollywood: The Screenwriting Career of Michael Wilson (1914-1978)’ in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, April 2014 pp. 187-207., p. 198.

³⁷⁸ BFI Library, David Lean Collection DL/6/5 letter from David Lean to Sam Spiegel (31/1/56); BFI Library, S.11712 *The Bridge on the River Kwai* first draft shooting script (n.d.)

characters' of Nicholson and Saito were presented as hero and villain, arguing that: 'It is a story of shades and tones, of half rights and half wrongs – of human dilemma. All we have at the moment is black and white' and it is significant that at this point Lean refers to *La Grande Illusion* (1937), a film generally regarded as an anti-war masterpiece.³⁷⁹ Furthermore, publicity material certainly suggests that the film's makers wanted to emphasise its exploration of the ethics of war with the press-book featuring a brief summary of the film that contains the following ending to the story: 'As the sun comes up, deep silence broods over the scene of desolation. But somewhere beyond the distant horizons, more men are parading to chauvinistic marches and frenetic crowds are cheering them on. Across the chasm, across the years, only the solitary voice calling "Madness Madness!"'³⁸⁰ Significantly, several critics saw *Kwai* as making a powerful anti-war statement, suggesting that some audience members did too. The *Daily Mail's* critic described it as 'the screen's most powerful protest against the senselessness of war since *All Quiet on the Western Front*' and the *Daily Worker* described it as 'an almost unique tribute to the futility of war', while for the *People* it was 'a convincing argument against the folly and madness of war' and for the *Evening Standard*, also evoking memories of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, it was 'a war film in which the enemy is war'.³⁸¹

However, other critics commented on the film's uneasy mix of anti-war message and elements of the action-adventure film: *Monthly Film Bulletin* saw the film making 'sophisticated and telling comments' about men at war while also aspiring to the status of an epic war film, *Kinematograph Weekly* described it as 'profound and actionful' and *Tribune* declared: 'what seems to have started out as an ironical observation on the follies of militarism – with particular reference to British militarism – has been pummelled into acceptable box-office shape.'³⁸²

³⁷⁹ Ibid, director's notes February 1956

³⁸⁰ BFI Library *The Bridge on the River Kwai* small press-book (1957)

³⁸¹ *Daily Mail* 2 October 1957, *Daily Worker* 5 October 1957, *People* 6 October 1957, *Evening Standard* 3 October 1957

³⁸² *Monthly Film Bulletin* November 1957, *Kinematograph Weekly* 10 October 1957, *Tribune* 11 October 1957

The film was an outstanding box-office success and would appear to have been viewed by fairly inclusive audiences: being awarded a “U” certificate, being deemed suitable for children and adolescents and being considered likely to appeal to general audiences: ‘terrific entertainment anywhere’.³⁸³ The success of a film with an anti-war message might suggest approval for such sentiments among cinema-goers. However, it is also possible that the film succeeded as a war-as-adventure and war-as-spectacle film.

Like *Kwai*, *Yesterday’s Enemy* can be seen to explore the ethics of war and yet contains conflicting messages. The film has particular significance among British Second World War films as it features a British officer committing a war crime by ordering that two innocent Burmese civilians be shot by firing squad. In addition, the film hints at a moral equivalence between the British and Japanese commanding officers and contains a number of reflections on the ethics of war.

A small group of soldiers, cut off from their unit during a retreat, arrives at a Burmese village occupied by Japanese soldiers. Having taken the village, the British commanding officer, Captain Langford (Stanley Baker), suspects that an encoded map they have discovered contains information about Japanese plans to invade India. In the belief that his action will persuade a Burmese interpreter who has worked for the Japanese to reveal the secrets of the map, Langford orders that two men from the village be shot by firing squad unless he talks. The killings are carried out and the interpreter, believing he will be killed next, reveals what he knows about the map. Later, the village is recaptured by the Japanese who, suspecting that the British troops have uncovered top-secret information about their invasion plans, threaten to execute British troops in order to persuade Langford to reveal what he knows. The film ends with Langford and all the other British killed and the Japanese uncertain as to whether their plans have been compromised.

³⁸³ *Kinematograph Weekly* 18 December 1958, *Kinematograph Weekly* 10 October 1957, *Monthly Film Bulletin* November 1957, *Today’s Cinema* 2 October 1957

The film certainly depicts war as brutal. The sight of a British officer ordering the killing of two innocent villagers clearly marks a crossing of the Rubicon in British cinema and was too much for one critic who declared that they simply could not believe that such incidents took place.³⁸⁴ In addition, the combat scenes themselves are harsh and brutal, and the film ends with the killing of all the British personnel including a padre and a civilian journalist. At the same time the film, through the character of the journalist Max (Leo McKern), suggests that war is futile when, towards the end of the film when it is clear that none of the unit will survive, he reflects, in words that inspire the film's title, that their suffering and sacrifice will be largely forgotten by future generations who will invite former foes – yesterday's enemy – to join their commemorations. In response to an assertion that each generation must honour its own dead, he declares bitterly: 'Yes of course! The public conscience. A few pence for a poppy and two minutes' silence once a year. Yesterday's enemy laying a wreath on the Cenotaph in honour of the men his country killed.' In view of such remarks, the film's ending, a memorial with the words 'When you go home, Tell them of us, and say, For their tomorrow, We gave our today' can be interpreted as a statement of bitter irony rather than as a tribute.

Particularly complex is the film's assessment of Langford. It has been suggested that *Yesterday's Enemy* can be seen as making 'disturbing amends' for *Camp on Blood Island* in challenging the myth that, unlike the Japanese, 'all British soldiers were perfect gentlemen who believed all wars could still be fought according to a strict code of decency and chivalry' and Langford's decision to order the killing of two civilians clearly indicates an abandonment of any notions of fighting a gentlemanly war.³⁸⁵ However, the film contains little condemnation of Langford or his action. Indeed, there are frequent occasions on which his courage and skill as a leader are applauded. The unit's senior NCO, Sergeant McKenzie (Gordon Jackson), defends him against criticism from the journalist and padre, declaring him an excellent military leader in whom he

³⁸⁴ *Daily Express* 18 September 1959

³⁸⁵ BFI Library, Hammer Film Productions Collection, Item 27 Keith Dudley Articles

has complete trust. Indeed, this battle-hardened veteran feels moved to express to Langford his admiration for him when, towards the end of the film, it appears likely that he will never see him again. Furthermore, the senior Japanese officer also expresses his admiration for Langford's courage and ability as a military leader and salutes him posthumously for his suicidal attempt to reach a radio that ensures that the Japanese will never discover the extent to which their invasion plans have been uncovered. Although they condemn the killing of the villagers at the time, the padre and the journalist – the two non-combatant characters who, like Cipton in *Kwai*, are able to express their opinions more freely – both later declare their admiration for Langford's courage and skills as a military leader. Max declares that their only chance of survival lies in following him and the padre, while ostensibly seeking to encourage Langford's second-in-command, is surely referring to Langford himself when he argues that a man who deliberately faces danger 'commands respect'.

The film also affords Langford the opportunity to defend himself. In words that recall the issue of killing at a distance as opposed to close quarters raised in *Orders to Kill*, Langford responds to the accusation that his ordering the killing of the two villagers shows that he lacks principles with the words: 'Oh you have some [principles]! You don't mind when a bomber pilot presses a button and kills a few hundred civilian people. You don't mind murder from a distance – so long as you personally are not involved. If you can't bear to look, turn your heads the other way!' In addition, a brief commentary contained in the script – that at one point describes Langford as 'a man of immense personal courage' – asserts that 'in his heart' Langford hoped he would not have to give the order to fire.³⁸⁶ Indeed, the film's director would later repeat the assertion that Langford had hoped desperately that 'he wouldn't have to go through with it'.³⁸⁷ The film clearly asserts that Langford is a courageous man who – like Howard, Robertson and Rawson in *Count Five and Die*, *Foxhole in Cairo* and *Circle of Deception* respectively – possesses the ruthlessness and single-mindedness required to

³⁸⁶ BFI Library, S.15196 *Yesterday's Enemy* final shooting script (1/1/59)

³⁸⁷ BFI Library, *Yesterday's Enemy* small press-book (1959)

defeat a ruthless enemy. What is less clear is whether Langford possessed such qualities before his military service or whether the war has brutalised him.

Like *Kwai*, *Yesterday's Enemy* has been said to contain an ambivalent attitude towards war.³⁸⁸ Again, the lack of a clear, unambiguous condemnation of Langford's actions and of war itself can, arguably to a greater extent than in the case of *Kwai*, be explained by the absence of a clear authorial voice, with the film's screenwriter, producer and director having different ideas of its central message. For writer Peter R Newman, *Yesterday's Enemy* was about challenging attempts to romanticise or glamorise war and about highlighting its folly: 'I wrote "Yesterday's Enemy" when I became depressed with seeing British and American war sagas which invariably showed a romantic, biased, heroic view of war. Films which depicted it as a jolly romp in which a good time was had by all ... I also wrote "Yesterday's Enemy" to point out the utter futility of war for victor, vanquished and victim alike.'³⁸⁹

Producer Michael Carreras certainly saw a rejection of romanticised notions of heroism, but his comments indicate that, for him, *Yesterday's Enemy* was about the brutality rather than the folly of war: 'A play which knocked the heroics out of war – which showed the British, in a desperate situation, fighting a war with the gloves right off in a grim and savage battle in which no quarter was asked or given on either side.'³⁹⁰ However, for director Val Guest *Yesterday's Enemy* was essentially the story of one man who faces a 'nightmarish problem and decision' and who, he implies, makes the right choice:

What he did was what he, as an individual, thought was his duty – sacrifice two lives to try and save thousands of British soldiers. And right up to the last minute he prayed he wouldn't have to go through with it. Can anyone imagine that Harry S Truman didn't have the same anguish of doubt

³⁸⁸ Manvell, p. 324

³⁸⁹ Press-book

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

when he faced the monumental decision of dropping the first Atom Bomb? It was one God-fearing man's belief that a minority should die to save a majority.³⁹¹

Publicity material certainly emphasised the grim nature of war. Statements attesting to the film's realism and honesty had been elicited from a number of veterans of the war in the Far East and of particular interest is the veterans' clear belief that most members of the public were woefully unaware of what they had gone through. One official of the Burma Star Association felt the film would inform the general public of the 'appalling hardship and almost unendurable strain' they had been through, while a senior naval officer considered that the film could show 'the younger generation ... what war can really mean.'³⁹² Of particular significance are two comments – a senior Army officer who draws attention to the 'moral dilemmas which must arise from war' and a veteran who refers to soldiers' 'faith' in and 'obedience' to their leaders – that hint that the events depicted in the film might have been more realistic than the *Daily Express* critic was prepared to believe.³⁹³

Critical reaction suggests that some audience members might have seen the film as making an anti-war statement: for Dilys Powell the film marked a significant landmark in British cinema: 'It has been a long time coming ... it has taken the cinema until now to get round once more to "War Is Hell" ... the film doesn't shrink from saying what it means: that war corrupts, and that if total war can't corrupt totally it has a pretty good shot at it', the *Star* felt the film stated 'quite bluntly that war is a bad thing and our side is no better than the other' while the *News of the World* considered it 'a savage indictment of war's hideous folly'.³⁹⁴ The reaction of other critics however suggests that audiences might have seen a conflicting message: while *Monthly Film Bulletin* felt that a balance had been achieved in asserting that 'total war, in spite of the individual acts of heroism, is a dirty, degrading, senseless waste of human life', *Tribune* felt that *Yesterday's Enemy's* attempting to both 'hate war and admire its glory' resulted in a

³⁹¹ Ibid.

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Ibid, *Daily Express* 18 September 1959

³⁹⁴ *Sunday Times* 20 September 1959, *Star* 17 September 1959, *News of the World* 20 September 1959

film that was suffering from 'schizophrenia', pointing to the irony of promoting an 'anti-war film' with the praises of generals and admirals and the *Daily Worker* declared that the film's producers had failed to make its message clear and simple: 'A film like this has the responsibility of choosing one of two paths. Either it must show that hatred for the fascist enemy was what made us fight – and win: or else it must take the firmly pacifist line and conclude that all war is filthy, stupid and worthless.'³⁹⁵

The film achieved, at best, modest box-office success at a time when most combat-oriented war films were proving extremely popular with audiences.³⁹⁶ The film's lack of commercial success is significant as it suggests both that audiences had little enthusiasm for films which expressed anti-war sentiments and that audiences were uneasy with depictions of ruthless military leaders.

7.4 Exploring the Ethics of War II: The World of Military Intelligence – *Orders to Kill*

Orders to Kill differs from the films in the "deception cycle" of military intelligence films, not only depicting war as brutal but also exploring a number of ethical questions and themes relating to war: whether orders to kill should be obeyed without question; its being much easier to kill at a distance than at close quarters and responsibility and guilt for the killing of innocent men, women and children. The film follows the fortunes

³⁹⁵ *Monthly Film Bulletin* September 1959, *Tribune* 18 September 1959, *Daily Worker* 19 September 1959

³⁹⁶ *Kinematograph Weekly* 17 December 1959

of an American former fighter-bomber pilot, Gene Summers (Paul Massie), who is recruited to carry out a one-off mission: to assassinate a member of the French resistance, Marcel Lafitte (Leslie French), who is suspected of betraying comrades to the Gestapo. Summers has serious doubts about the guilt of the mild-mannered family man, but is persuaded by his contact, Leonie (Irene Worth), that it is his duty to obey orders and carry out the killing. Having done so, he becomes wracked with guilt and suffers a nervous breakdown. The film ends with Summers, having come to terms with the fact that he has killed an innocent man, visiting Lafitte's wife and daughter to inform them that Lafitte had been a brave man who had died in the service of his country.

Like most films in the military intelligence cycle, *Orders to Kill* employs an expressionist/*film-noir* visual style first seen during Summers' training in close-quarter killing when his instructor, a commander in the Royal Navy (James Robertson Justice), introduces him to his ironically termed 'Tunnel of Love' – in fact a "House of Horrors" – that consists of a series of darkened rooms in which the trainee must distinguish between civilians and grotesque cartoon-figure Nazis. It is also seen when Leonie persuades Summers to undertake his mission in a scene shot in a semi-darkened room in which Leonie moves at times into complete darkness and in which reflections of the two characters are seen on occasions in a full-length mirror. On both occasions the visual style helps to create a sense of unease as Summers takes decisive steps towards the killing of Lafitte.

Of particular interest is the film's exploration of ethical questions relating to the use of bombing raids: the detachment of the fighter-bomber pilot thousands of feet above his target and the inevitability of civilian deaths. This issue is explored when Summers – who earlier informed a psychiatrist charged with assessing his suitability for the mission that if you do not drop bombs 'you don't win wars' – is schooled in how to kill a man with improvised weaponry. Summers' instructor's apparent ghoulish enthusiasm for weapons and killing techniques – his office is full of weapons from

different periods of time – masks a more reflective person who is acutely aware that the sort of killing being asked of Summers is very different from the sort of killing to which he is used. As he informs Summers’ superior officer, MacMahon (Eddie Albert):

You know the odd thing about war is that, as we grow more civilised, so does our way of killing. No, I mean that. When we were still savages we didn’t feel guilty about killing with our bare hands, but we do now. You can almost measure our sense of guilt with a rangefinder. Major, I wish I were training pilots to drop bombs because my job here is harder. I’ve got to stop civilised men from thinking about the reality of killing a fellow human being with their bare hands, because if they thought about it they might never do it. But they’ve got to do it, just as Jean’s got to do it.

Interestingly, the script contains a detailed explanation, missing from the final cut, of what was meant by measuring ‘guilt with a rangefinder’:

... We’d sooner bomb a man from 5,000 feet than shoot him with a rifle from where we can just see him. And we’d sooner shoot him from where we can just see him than do it with a revolver where we can see him plain. And we’d sooner do it with a revolver than a knife, because with a knife there’s contact. And if the knife handle’s six inches long, that makes us feel six inches less guilty than if we killed him with our bare hands – because with hands (he strangles the air) there’s touch.³⁹⁷

The issue is raised again when Summers reports his doubts about Lafitte’s guilt to his French contact, Leonie, who makes explicit reference to the certainty that he has already killed innocent people during his time as a pilot when she admonishes him for entertaining doubts rather than simply obeying his orders to kill Lafitte. When Summers declares that killing an innocent man would be ‘murder’, she resorts:

Murder? But this is war, war, and in a war the innocent and the guilty get killed together. When you were ordered to drop bombs over France, did you refuse because you might have killed innocent Frenchmen? Or women? Or children like yourself? Or cats? Or are you such a magnificent marksman that you can press a button and drop a bomb that’ll only kill Germans and collaborators? You didn’t go whining back to your superior officers saying: “I couldn’t do it. There may have been a man in the marshalling-yard that loved his mother.” Then why are you whining at me. I’m not your mother. I’m not anybody’s mother – not any more.

³⁹⁷ BFI Library, S.9716 *Orders to Kill* shooting script (n.d.)

Finally, the issue is raised when, towards the end of the film, Summers, seemingly recovered from his breakdown, tells his MacMahon that he is now reconciled to the fact that that he has killed not only an innocent man in Lafitte but also innocent men, women and children during his time as a pilot:

... Leonie once said to me that in a war innocent people and guilty people get killed together. I didn't refuse to drop my bombs did I, just because they might kill an innocent person? I just obeyed orders and dropped them. What was so different about obeying orders and killing Lafitte with my bare hands even if he was innocent? She was right, there is no difference. Only when I dropped a bomb I wasn't down there to hear someone say 'Why?'

In many ways, Summers' declaration that his conscience is clear and his visit to Lafitte's wife and daughter – with their suggestion that the issues raised during the film have been resolved satisfactorily – provide the film with an inconsistent and unsatisfactory ending. The film's director is reported to have been closely involved in the production of the screenplay and to have been keen to present events as if inside the character of Summers but no record exists of the sort of statement he saw the film as making.³⁹⁸ However, it has been suggested that the film's producer, Anthony Havelock-Allan, might have had in mind the 'soften[ing]' effect of the final scene when he reflected, more than thirty years after the film's release, that it 'would have been better with a harder, sharper edge to it. It needed to be conceived more harshly.'³⁹⁹ As such it could be argued that *Orders to Kill*, like *Kwai* and *Yesterday's Enemy* makes an anti-war statement without being an unambiguously anti-war film. However, in *Orders to Kill* the exploration of ethical issues – foreshadowed in Summers' selection, raised during his training and developed during his time in France – is far more central to the plot than in either *Kwai* or *Yesterday's Enemy*. It would, for instance, be difficult to view the film as a straight-forward man-on-a-mission-behind-enemy-lines film. Indeed, given the frequent references to bomber aircraft that appear to equate the killing of

³⁹⁸ Private Collection, *Orders to Kill* Cannes Film Festival press-book (1958); RJ Minney, *The Films of Anthony Asquith* (New York: AS Barnes, 1976), pp. 165-7.

³⁹⁹ Tom Ryall, *Anthony Asquith* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 118; Anthony Havelock-Allan interview (1990) in *An Autobiography of British Cinema*, p. 293.

innocent civilians in bombing raids with the brutal murder of an innocent man, the film can be read as either a critique of the Allied bombing of Germany and Japan or a warning about future wars in which “nuclear buttons” would be pressed by people giving the orders remotely from a distance.

Certainly, several critics saw the film as an exploration of the ethics of war, and possibly an anti-war film. The *News of the World* described it a ‘most emphatic protest against war’, for the *Daily Worker* it was ‘a human and dramatic study in the grim ethics of wartime killing’, *Tribune* considered it ‘a pacifist film’ that argued that war was ‘filthy because of its indiscrimination’, the *Sunday Express* viewed it as a ‘macabre probe into the conscience of every one of us’ and the *Sunday Times* declared ‘[f]or once the British cinema tackles a problem of principle: individual responsibility in war’.⁴⁰⁰

As *Orders to Kill* is the most overtly anti-war film of the period, it is significant that the film – which was predicted to appeal to a more sophisticated adult audience – proved to be a box-office failure at a time when cinema audiences showed no let-up in their enthusiasm for combat-oriented war films.⁴⁰¹ It would appear that audiences had little taste for films which contained such a direct anti-war message, albeit one whose message is somewhat blunted by its ending.

Conclusion

Even if the restrained nature of British war films from the first half of the decade provides some support for the assertion that post-war British cinema underplays the horror and the savagery of war, this assertion is confounded by the films discussed in this chapter in which the brutal and merciless nature of war features far more centrally

⁴⁰⁰ *News of the World* 30 March 1958, *Daily Worker* 29 March 1958, *Tribune* 4 April 1958, *Sunday Express* 30 March 1958, *Sunday Times* 30 March 1958

⁴⁰¹ *Kinematograph Weekly* 20 March 1958, *Monthly Film Bulletin* May 1958, *Daily Cinema* 17 March 1958, *Kinematograph Weekly* 18 December 1958

and is explored far more directly than in earlier films with their occasional hints of war's cruelty. Indeed, depictions of the savagery and horror of war – the desperation of women and children facing death from disease and malnutrition; prisoners, including women, subjected to the brutality, and indeed sadism, of their Japanese captors; innocent Burmese villagers killed by a firing squad in order to persuade a fellow Burmese to divulge information and a brave member of the French Resistance beaten to death by a man he had earlier befriended – clearly left an impression on critics at the time. In addition, the further assertion made by one writer that war is presented as a game in which the enemy can be out-witted by cleverer people should be viewed in the context of films in which it is brave men and women who are being sent to their deaths as pawns in these games of deception.⁴⁰²

Furthermore, as well as showing the brutality of war, some of these films – *Kwai*, *Yesterday's Enemy* and *Orders to Kill* – engage with questions concerning the ethics of war and can even be viewed as warning against future conflicts. That none of these films, on account of their containing either conflicting or blurred messages, can be described as an unambiguously anti-war film should not detract from their significance. Each of these films was intended by at least part of its creative team – writer, director or producer – to make what might be termed an anti-war statement and each was considered by some, often many, critics to have done so.

The harsh tone of the films considered in this section is reflected in the number of “A” certificates, and the one “X” certificate, awarded, suggesting less children and families present at their screenings compared to combat-oriented films released during the first half of the decade.

The commercial success of many of these films suggests that audiences were comfortable with harsher depictions of war. However, it would certainly appear that

⁴⁰² Armes, p. 177.

British cinema audiences had little appetite for anti-war films. Of the three films that could be said to make an anti-war statement, only one, *The Bridge on the river Kwai*, proved popular with cinema audiences, something that can be explained by the film's containing sufficient elements of the war-as-adventure and war-as-spectacle film to overshadow any anti-war sentiments. *Yesterday's Enemy* achieved at best moderate success and *Orders to Kill*, the film that makes the most overtly anti-war statement, failed to attract audiences. It would also appear that audiences had not entirely embraced the new breed of ruthless military leader.

Chapter 8 – War Comedies

War comedies are relatively rare until the second half of the 1950s. *George in Civvy Street* (1946), in which the eponymous hero (George Formby) finds that life after demobilisation is not as straight-forward as he had assumed, makes an amusing counter-point to the cycle of tales of returning Servicemen, but the absence of other war comedies strongly suggests that in the immediate aftermath of the conflict film-makers had concluded that the war itself was no laughing matter. The turn of the decade saw a handful of comedies/light-hearted dramas – *Private Angelo*, *Hotel Sahara* and *Appointment with Venus* – but during the early 1950s film-makers focused largely on the production of factually-based narratives. Although some of these factually-based narratives contain moments of light relief, these serve essentially to show that British Service personnel had retained their sense of humour despite being surrounded by death and destruction: the reaction of the control room commander in *Angels One Five* – ‘you don’t say!’ – to being informed that the airfield is being bombed when it is perfectly obvious to everyone; the Able Seaman who tells tall stories to a credulous barman after returning to port following an arduous voyage in *Gift Horse* and the reactions of fellow officers to Bennett’s suspected duodenal ulcer in *The Cruel Sea*. The nature of war comedies and their rarity during this period – a domestic comedy, *Those People Next Door*, and a vehicle for the talents of Max Bygraves, *Bless ‘Em All* (1949) – suggest a reluctance to make light of war or use comedy to undermine the respectful tone of war films from this time, something that can be seen in one critic’s puzzlement at the inclusion of ‘implausible farce’ in *Cockleshell Heroes*.⁴⁰³

However, during the second half of the 1950s war comedies feature more prominently with a significant number – *Privates Progress*, *The Square Peg*, *Desert Mice* (1959), *The Night We Dropped a Clanger* (1959), *Operation Bullshine*, *Light up the Sky* and *The League of Gentlemen* – appearing over a five-year period. One writer has suggested

⁴⁰³ *News Chronicle* 18 November 1955

that in British war comedy idealised images of the nation at war are set against more realistic images – ‘courage and heroism, sacrifice of self for one’s comrades’ contrasting with ‘maximum inefficiency, inept bureaucracy, and widespread insubordination’ in what are, in effect, ‘comedies of social realism’ – while another has asserted that these films see film-makers tapping into ‘a deep seam of irreverence towards militarism and the myth of the Blitz’ to challenge idealised images of the British serviceman and woman at war.⁴⁰⁴ However, it will be seen that although in these films Service personnel, both officers and other ranks, have a rather hazy understanding of where they fit in to the big picture of the war and spend much of their time muddling along and thinking of home, these depictions of British men and women at war are largely affectionate, with Service personnel shown as largely loyal and courageous and usually provided with the opportunity to step up to the plate and prove their mettle when the time comes. The cycle, however, begins with the most biting satire of all on the institutions of the Armed Forces and fondly-remembered images of the British at war to be found in any British film: *Private’s Progress*.

8.1 Breaching the Dam – *Private’s Progress*

Private’s Progress, by ‘using comedy and satire to present a different and inverted portrait’ of the nation at war, can be seen as a riposte to idealised accounts of the British at war to be found in films such as *Gift Horse*, *The Cruel Sea*, *Above Us the Waves* and *The Dam Busters*.⁴⁰⁵ As the film’s central character, the hapless Stanley Windrush (Ian Carmichael), postpones his studies and joins the Army he encounters few others who share his sense of duty but is instead confronted by indifference, cynicism and even venality. Before his departure for basic training, a university porter advises him to ‘Look after Number One’ and guests at his sister’s party are bemused by

⁴⁰⁴ Boyd-Bowman, p. 39.; Andrew Spicer, ‘Subversive Images of the Second World War’ in Steven Caunce et al (editors) *Relocating Britishness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 167-82., p. 168.

⁴⁰⁵ Marcia Landy, ‘Nation and Imagi-nation in *Private’s Progress*’ in Alan Burton, Tim O’Sullivan and Paul Wells (editors) *The Family Way: The Boulting Brothers and British Film Culture* (Trowbridge, Flick Books, 2000), pp. 175-88., p. 176.

his spirit of self-sacrifice. Having failed the officer selection test, he is schooled by fellow recruits at a holding station in the art of avoiding work and it is only when his talent for oriental languages is discovered that it appears that Windrush will be able to contribute to the war effort. However, rather than being posted to the Far East along with fellow graduates of the language course, he is conscripted to “Operation Hat Rack”, a mission masterminded by his uncle, Brigadier Bertram Tracepurcel (Dennis Price), to rescue and then sell on the black-market art treasures looted by the Germans. The film ends with Windrush, wrongly suspected of being one of the organisers of “Operation Hat Rack”, being escorted away by police officers.

Gone are the selfless, dedicated officers and the loyal, “mustn’t grumble” other ranks. In their place are the likes of Major Hitchcock (Terry-Thomas) who only discovers the large numbers of soldiers visiting the cinema while on duty because he has done the same himself and who hears a charge of drunkenness against Windrush while nursing a monumental hangover, Private Cox (Richard Attenborough) with his talent for avoiding work and his dodges to avoid paying for rail tickets and Brigadier Tracepurcel who uses a scrambled line to pass on horse-racing tips and who employs a commando unit to help him steal art treasures.

Given the film’s depiction of the armed forces it is not surprising that the War Office would not give it its official approval in the form of assistance and the right to acknowledge its involvement.⁴⁰⁶ Undeterred, the film’s producers obtained the required equipment from other sources, at a reputed cost of £5,000, and turned the Army’s refusal of assistance to their advantage, employing opening captions that reversed the usual respectful statements of gratitude: ‘The service caps issued for use in this film are intended to be worn by imaginary personnel only. Others who find themselves well fitted should regard it as purely coincidental’ followed by grateful thanks for ‘the official co-operation of absolutely nobody’.⁴⁰⁷ Ironically, the Army’s

⁴⁰⁶ *Daily Mail* 8 September 1955

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid

refusal of assistance freed the film's producers from the restrictions that would have accompanied it, ensuring that the due deference hitherto accorded to the institution of the Armed Forces was entirely absent. Indeed, one reviewer argued that the lack of official co-operation was a blessing as compromises would have robbed the film of its 'really notable quality of irreverence', while another felt that that the absence of Services involvement ensured that the 'service scenes are, for once, absolutely authentic.'⁴⁰⁸

Certainly, part of the butt of the joke in *Private's Progress* is both the Army as a representative of the Establishment and the institution of National Service, and it has been pointed out that the film can be viewed within a tradition of Service comedies.⁴⁰⁹ However, *Private's Progress* is set during the war and in its highly irreverent treatment of British Service personnel at war the film marks a departure from the very respectful treatment previously accorded them. As such, the film can be seen as having, to employ the imagery of one of the most popular war films of the period, breached the dam and it is significance that rather than there being a cascade of similarly biting satire there was a two-year period during which no new war comedies were released followed by films which, although they contained far less idealised depictions of the British serviceman and woman at war, treated them with a good deal of affection and, indeed, respect.

The film was an outstanding box-office success and, with its "U" certificate and perceived appeal to family audiences, was likely seen by fairly inclusive audiences.⁴¹⁰ That *Private's Progress* was seen as a departure from earlier films is apparent from press reaction at the time: one critic commented the 'stars in battle-dress' of *Private's Progress* 'don't behave a bit like Jack Hawkins or John Mills in the usual British war film' and another felt that tales of 'the stiff upper lip and derring-do' had been replaced by a 'very recognizable wartime inhabited almost entirely by malingering

⁴⁰⁸ *Tribune* 4 March 1956, *Daily Express* 16 February 1956

⁴⁰⁹ Durnat, p. 235.

⁴¹⁰ *Kinematograph Weekly* 13 December 1956, *Monthly Film Bulletin* April 1956

scroungers in the barrack room and thick-skulled temporary gentlemen in the mess.’⁴¹¹ Furthermore, one critic welcomed this challenge to British cinema’s ‘unhealthy respect for a uniform’ while another declared it ‘the perfect antidote to high-falutin (sic) about war. It is the un-heroic record of the hermit-crab combatant, the man who never wanted to have “much of a war”; nearly eleven years after V.E. Day it is a relief to find this deplorable character celebrated on the British screen, which has given so long an innings to steel nerves and iron jaws.’⁴¹²

8.2 Unlikely Heroes – *The Square Peg*, *Operation Bullshine*, *Desert Mice* and *Light up the Sky*

The Square Peg can be viewed as the beginning of a cycle of war comedies – including *Desert Mice*, *Operation Bullshine* and *Light up the Sky* – that derive much of their humour from the contrast between the heroic and the ordinary but which end as affectionate tributes to the ordinary serviceman and woman. Most of these films start with what has been described as an ‘ironic opening’, in which images or descriptions of wartime heroism are followed almost immediately by images or descriptions of ordinary men or women who, on the face of it, fall short of this heroic ideal.⁴¹³ However, despite their ordinariness these men and women reveal qualities such as courage, fortitude and loyalty to their comrades that, by the end of the film, bestow upon them the status of hero. Indeed, these films could be said to assert that it was the ordinary man and woman who won the war.

The Square Peg begins with images of wartime heroes, including Churchill and Montgomery, and opening captions that refer to ‘many remarkable adventures’ that have taken place ‘on sea, on land and in the air’. This idealised image of heroism is then contrasted with the reality of the ordinary man, in this case a road mender, Norman Pitkin (Norman Wisdom), described as an ‘indomitable fighter, rugged individualist and faithful employee of St. Godric’s Borough Council’, but who is first

⁴¹¹ *Star* 17 February 1956, *Financial Times* 20 February 1956

⁴¹² *Sunday Express* 19 February 1956, *Sunday Times* 19 February 1956

⁴¹³ Spicer, ‘Subversive Images of the Second World War’, p. 176.

seen asleep in the back of a lorry. After a run-in with a sergeant at the local Army barracks, Pitkin and his supervisor Mr Grimsdale (Edward Chapman) are conscripted and, after basic training, are mistakenly parachuted into France where Grimsdale is captured along with Lesley Cartland (Honor Blackman), an officer with the Special Operations Executive with whom Pitkin had fallen in love when she was briefly stationed at St. Godric's. Here, Pitkin finds his mettle, tunnels into the grounds of the German headquarters, impersonates the feared General Schreiber (also played by Wisdom) and, with a fair measure of luck, rescues his comrades and avoids the firing squad. As well as showcasing Wisdom's comic skills, the film sees Pitkin demonstrating pugnacity, courage and loyalty and his heroism is rewarded on his return to St. Godric's when he is appointed Mayor of the Borough Council.

A similar ironic opening is employed in *Operation Bullshine*, the story of an artillery battery operated in part by women from the ATS. A voiced-over commentary that talks of Britain in 'her hour of peril and need' in 1940 is accompanied by shots of coastal defences, sandbagged buildings, a balloon barrage, Local Defence Volunteers drilling and people queuing uncomplainingly at food shops. However, when a commentator poses the question of who supplied the 'courage', the 'fighting spirit' and the 'will to win' that brought the nation 'through darkness into the light of hope' and eventually to 'the promise of certain victory', any expectations of images of Churchill or other wartime heroes are immediately dispelled as the film cuts to an ATS column on the march, headed by an officer described as 'a lady of ample proportions' followed by ranks of young women who are being leered at by their male comrades from various barrack room windows.⁴¹⁴ As in *Square Peg*, the recruits are unlikely heroes – more concerned with romance than winning the war – who, none-the-less, step up to the plate towards the end of the film, finally managing to shoot down a German aircraft the pilot of which, this being comedy, manages to bail out and parachute to safety before being pursued by amorous members of the ATS.

⁴¹⁴ BFI Library, S.2778 *Operation Bullshine* draft script "Girls in Arms" (12/9/58)

Expectations of heroism are likewise raised and then firmly dashed at the beginning of *Desert Mice* as captions reading 'War' and 'France 1940', accompanied by shots of an anti-aircraft battery, give way to a shot of a rifle that, it is revealed, is trained not on German soldiers but on a rabbit. The would-be marksman is Major Poskett (Alfred Marks), a man who is in no hurry to use his rifle for the intended purpose as a suggested opening for the film makes clear: 'Many stories have been told of World War II – but this story has never been told. This is the story of one man's fight against overwhelming odds, his struggle against the Nemesis that dogged his footsteps, his efforts against those who stood between him and his one ambition – to have a cushy war.'⁴¹⁵ Posket, who had believed that he had been forgotten about and would be left to enjoy a quiet war, is dismayed to learn that his second-in-command has requested a visit from an ENSA troupe to lift the morale of the men, a visit that leads to Posket's being posted to North Africa to accompany them on tour. As with the other films in this cycle, the unlikely heroes in the form of the ENSA troupe, led not by Posket but by his second-in-command, are afforded their opportunity to prove themselves in battle: evading capture by German commandos, capturing a German major and leading the pursuing Germans into an Allied ambush. The film pokes fun at the British Army in one particularly memorable scene which sees the German major (Marius Goring) instructing his troops as to how to disguise themselves as British soldiers. He tells them they must 'cease to be efficient, well-trained soldiers' and play the part of British soldiers in which they must 'grumble continually, drink tea incessantly and worship Vera Lynn' and provides them with 'three phrases that will cover all eventualities: "Jolly good show", "Where's the flipping char?" and "Yanks go home!"'

Light up the Sky might well have surprised audiences who had chosen to see the film on the basis of their familiarity with the work of either members of the cast or the director. Despite a cast list – Benny Hill, Tommy Steele, Ian Carmichael and Dick Emery – that suggests a showcase for comic or musical talent, there is little other than the brief inclusion of a music hall double act featuring two brothers, Sid and Eric McCaffey

⁴¹⁵ BFI Library, David Clime Collection DRC/22/12 early draft of *Desert Mice* entitled "Corn in Egypt" (n.d.)

(Hill and Steele). In addition, publicity material for the film dispels any thoughts that the film is in the tradition of war films for which its director had become well known:

For years producer-director Lewis Gilbert nursed an ambition. He wanted to put the ordinary soldier on the screen – just as he really was. He had dealt with enough heroes. He had filmed the stirring story of Douglas Bader. He had filmed the cloak-and-dagger career of secret agent Violet Szabo. He had filmed a great naval battle in “Sink the Bismarck!” Now he wanted to film the war of the ordinary Tommy.⁴¹⁶

The film is book-ended by scenes, set around the time of the film’s release, of a cricket match being played on the grounds where a searchlight battery had been located during the war. In the clubhouse, which it later becomes apparent must have rebuilt from the accommodation hut that was destroyed during the war, the crew’s former commanding officer, Lieutenant Ogleby (Carmichael), reminisces about his time as a station commander and about the men he commanded. His words, as the film cuts to shots of members of the crew playing cards, certainly follow the by-now established pattern of contrasting the heroic and the ordinary, but also articulate a sense of genuine affection for the ordinary soldier:

All sorts of chaps one used to meet in the Services. Good types, bad types. Now I know these were my chaps and all that, but I would like to say what a fine body of men they were, tireless in their devotion to duty, relentless in their pursuit of the enemy, a ruthless, efficient fighting machine. Yes, I would like to say it, but unfortunately it just isn’t true. Yes, there they are. These military misfits, these nonentities, and yet have you ever noticed how a pond – a little patch of muddy water – sometimes reflects the sky?

As Lance-Bombardier Tomlinson (Victor Maddern) struggles to keep the other six members of the crew under control – at the beginning of the film one of the crew returns late from leave while another has been stealing eggs from a nearby farm – it becomes apparent that the men have the sort of concerns that many people would have experienced during the war. Eric has married following a whirlwind wartime

⁴¹⁶ BFI Library, *Light up the Sky* medium press-book (1960)

romance only to find himself falling in love with someone else and his brother, Sid, who has been looking out for him since their mother died, feels hurt that his brother is reluctant to take him into his confidence and fears that he might act rashly. Leslie Smith (Johnny Briggs) believes he will lose his girlfriend to another man and goes absent without leave when he hears rumours of an overseas posting that might end their relationship. Roland Kenyon (Harry Locke) wants desperately to be transferred to the Catering Corps so that he can learn a trade and support his large family when the war is over and Ted Green (Sydney Tafler) worries constantly about his son stationed in North Africa.

The characters of Tomlinson and Green stand out particularly. Tomlinson, as the sole non-commissioned officer among the crew, has his work cut out to keep the others in order at all times, but largely manages to do so without resorting to the sort of threats and bullying often associated with non-commissioned officers (often played by Maddern himself) seen in other films. In arguably the most poignant scene in the film Ted, who had been attempting to catch the mail van to send a letter to his son, finds himself presented with a telegram informing him that his son has been killed in action. Both recalling and reversing the scene in *Gift Horse* in which shortly after learning of his son's death Commander Fraser (Trevor Howard) walks away from the ship with any tears he might be shedding unseen by the camera, Ted walks away from the hut and into the mist to be alone with his grief, his tears clearly visible. Furthermore, the loyalty of the British soldier to his comrades is shown in the way that, despite their almost constant bickering, everyone in the group rallies around, first, Leslie when he goes absent without leave and then Ted as he struggles with his grief. As in other films in this cycle, the group is afforded the opportunity to show its courage and heroism in combat, in this case when, during a particularly heavy bombardment of London, the post is attacked by a German fighter aircraft. The death of Leslie, who had become a surrogate son to Ted following his own son's death, in this attack provides a moving finale to the section of the film set during the war.

Of the four films, three – *The Square Peg*, *Operation Bullshine* and *Light Up the Sky* – achieved major box-office success, with only *Desert Mice* failing to make an impact.⁴¹⁷ All four would probably have been seen by fairly inclusive – ‘all classes and both sexes’, ‘popular audiences’, ‘for most cinemas’ – family audiences.⁴¹⁸ The films’ popularity would suggest that audiences were comfortable with the mixing of war and comedy and comments made by several critics tend to confirm this, although occasional comments suggest that some cinema-goers might have had their reservations. So while *Square Peg* could be described as ‘a wonderful crackpot piece of buffoonery’, the sort of ‘laughter [that] customers want’ and ‘barracks fun’, one critic was uneasy about ‘japes about French resistance, British agents parachuting into France and the firing squad at dawn’.⁴¹⁹ Similarly, while the one critic saw *Operation Bullshine* as ‘a harmless exercise in high spirits’, another felt the ending in which a German pilot is mobbed by amorous female soldiers gave a ‘nasty twist’ to the film.⁴²⁰ In addition, one critic was clearly unhappy about the war being the subject of ‘light comedy’ in *Desert Mice* – elsewhere described as ‘homely humour’ and ‘a very enjoyable dish of good cheer’ – reminding readers of the ‘millions of democrats and Jews’ who ended up ‘going to the gas chambers’.⁴²¹ In addition, critical reaction to *Light Up the Sky* suggests that audiences could view a war comedy not only as inoffensive but also as an authentic and moving account of wartime experience. Several critics described the men of the battery as recognisably human with one declaring: ‘They are a bunch of half-baked characters fumbling their way to some sort of attitude to life, with only half a mind on the matter in hand of fighting the Germans. I found them endearingly funny.’⁴²²

⁴¹⁷ *Kinematograph Weekly* December 13 1958, *Kinematograph Weekly* 17 December 1959, *Kinematograph Weekly* 15 December 1960

⁴¹⁸ *Kinematograph Weekly* 4 December 1958, *Daily Cinema* 3 December 1958, *Monthly Film Bulletin* January 1959, *Daily Cinema* 4 December 1959, *Daily Cinema* 1 July 1960, *Monthly Film Bulletin* August 1960

⁴¹⁹ *News of the World* 7 December 1958, *Daily Mirror* 5 December 1958, *Evening News* 4 December 1958, *Sunday Times* 7 December 1958

⁴²⁰ *Guardian* 4 July 1959, *Daily Worker* 4 July 1959

⁴²¹ *Daily Worker* 19 December 1959, *News of the World* 27 December 1959, *Star* 17 December 1959

⁴²² *Times* 11 July 1960, *Daily Worker* 9 July 1960, *Star* 6 July 1960, *Evening Standard* 7 July 1960, *Evening News* 6 July 1960, *Observer* 10 July 1960, *Sunday Dispatch* 10 July 1960, *Daily Express* 8 July 1960

8.3 Parodies of War Films – *The Night We Dropped a Clanger* and *The League of Gentlemen*

In *The Night We Dropped a Clanger*, a spoof of the at times comic *I Was Monty's Double* (1958), a double, Aircraftsman Atwood (Brian Rix), is trained to impersonate the too-good-to-be-true heroic RAF officer Wing-Commander Blenkinsop (also played by Rix) – the dual roles serving to contrast the ideal with the real – and sent to North Africa so that the real Blenkinsop can be parachuted into France, no longer pursued by the Gestapo, to investigate Germany's new secret weapon. The spoofing of the idealised war hero can be seen in the way that, as part of his training, Atwood is told that he must learn to be 'arrogant', 'languid' and 'insouciant', a depiction well captured in the following description:

Blenkinsop was wearing the uniform of the R.A.F., the rank of Wing Commander, the dark, crisp hair of a man in his thirties, the trim moustache of a man who knows a trim moustache suits him, the firm mouth of a man who doesn't stand any hankie-pankie, the bright gleaming eyes of a man who smells danger from afar and welcomes it, and the insufferably complacent air of an officer who knows darn well he can adopt a superior attitude to a superior officer and get away with it.⁴²³

This irreverence continues throughout the film with the sending up of two wartime heroes. A character at first thought to be Montgomery turns out to be 'Monty's double', something of which the real Bernard Montgomery, who had not wanted *I Was Monty's Double* to be made, would no doubt have further disapproved.⁴²⁴ In addition, the Air Vice-Marshal, a rather ineffective leader who is always ready to take the credit for anything that succeeds and certain to pass the blame when things go wrong, goes by the name of Bertram Bukpasser (played by Cecil Parker), possibly a reference to Maurice Buckmaster, formerly Head of F (French) Section of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), who had featured in both *Odette* and *Carve Her Name with Pride*.

⁴²³ BFI Library, S.1813 *The Night We Dropped a Clanger* three-part serialisation (n.d.)

⁴²⁴ National Archive, WO 32/16478 Facilities for the film "I Was Monty's Double" Marksman Films Ltd

Of additional interest is the way in which the film's producers clearly felt that weapons such as the V1, and indeed the atomic bomb, were now a suitable subject for comedy. When Blenkinsop attempts to disarm a rocket he discovers a small object that he assumes to be part of an atomic weapon but later realises, when a hen exits the rocket, is in fact an egg. Later, Atwood evades capture by hiding inside one of the rockets only to find himself trapped inside as it is fired towards England.

The League of Gentlemen turns on its head the familiar narrative of the specialist team assembled and trained for a specific job. In this case, the team consists of cashiered former officers and the mission is an armed bank robbery. However, despite the men's past crimes – their collective charge sheet includes murder, theft, sexual impropriety, financial irregularity and gross negligence – the film, described in publicity material as containing comedy and romance as well as action, manages to elicit sympathy, in large part because no-one is harmed in the raid, for this group of men described early in the film as 'all crooks of one sort or another'.⁴²⁵ Of particular interest is the casting of Jack Hawkins as the embittered former Lieutenant-Colonel, Norman Hyde. In addition, the film pokes fun at two of Churchill's famous wartime speeches and suggests that not all officers were gentlemen.

The League of Gentlemen achieved major box-office success and, given that several critics noted the absence of gentlemanly qualities among the team, it would appear that audiences were comfortable with films that parodied the depictions of officers as gentlemen.⁴²⁶ *The Night They Dropped a Clanger* failed at the box-office but comments from two critics again suggest that audiences could laugh about the country's now not-so-recent experiences of war with one declaring that the film merited 'high marks for lunacy' for this 'piece of nonsense about the RAF and the secrets of Nazi bombs during

⁴²⁵ BFI Library, *The League of Gentlemen* small press-book (1960)

⁴²⁶ *Kinematograph Weekly* 15 December 1960, *Evening News* 7 April 1960, *News Chronicle* 8 April 1960, *Daily Worker* 9 April 1960

wartime' and another describing it as 'a merry mixture of wartime slapstick and belly laughs'.⁴²⁷

Conclusion

Films such as *The Square Peg*, *Operation Bullshine*, *Desert Mice* and *Light up the Sky* consciously contrast the idealised image of the nation's servicemen and women enthusiastically pursuing the war with an arguably more realistic picture of men and women who are often confused as to what is expected of them and who would much rather be at home with their loved ones. However, the humour is gentle and these depictions of ordinary servicemen and servicewomen can be seen as affectionate tributes to the British at war in that they display not only loyalty to their comrades but also the necessary courage when called on, as they inevitably are, to confront the enemy in some sort of hostile action. As such, these war comedies appear to assert that the British people are not by nature militaristic – indeed, rather than practising parade-ground drills or enduring route marches they would much sooner be enjoying a cup of tea or a pint of beer – but if threatened they can and will defend themselves effectively. Indeed, publicity material for *Light up the Sky* asserts that the nation can be said to owe a debt of honour to the sort of men and women depicted in these films: 'They were a mixed bunch, living, laughing and fighting together. They skylarked, scrounged, argued, grumbled. Just the sort of blokes who helped win the war.'⁴²⁸

⁴²⁷ *Kinematograph Weekly* December 1959, *People* 4 October 1959, *News of the World* 4 October 1959

⁴²⁸ *Light up the Sky* medium press-book (1960)

In terms of depictions of the British at war, this group of films can be seen to contribute not so much to the sort of counter-myth to the myth of the Blitz, but rather to an affectionate development of it. Furthermore, the commercial success of these films suggests that cinema-goers approved of this development of the myth of the British at war.

Chapter 9 – Less-idealised Heroes

Introduction

One writer has identified 'a refreshing irreverence' creeping into the combat-oriented war films of the late 1950s and this can be seen in a change in the type of central character in films of this period.⁴²⁹ The heroes of British Second World War films of the early 1950s were, for most of the time, sticklers for the regulations, smartly turned-out, enthusiastic about pursuing the war and, with the occasional exception, sober. The second half of the decade would see few examples of the chivalric hero as exemplified by Jack Hawkins in *Angels One Five* and *The Cruel Sea*, John Mills in *Above Us the Waves* and Trevor Howard in *Gift Horse*, with only Kenneth More in *Reach for the Sky* and *Sink the Bismarck!* providing the exception that proves the rule. These idealised heroes would find themselves replaced with men who had far less regard for regulations, were far less well-turned-out, were at times prepared to leave the war to others and were often anything but sober. However, as with the war comedies, the irreverence with which this new kind of hero is treated is tempered with both respect and affection. Indeed, these men exhibit many of the key qualities – courage, determination and loyalty to others – demonstrated by their more idealised counterparts.

9.1 Courage in a Bottle – *Ice Cold in Alex* and *The Key*

Although alcohol features frequently in films from the early 1950s – airmen drinking to let off steam in the officers' mess in *Angels One Five*, *Appointment in London* and *The Dam Busters*; ships' captains getting blind drunk in *Gift Horse* and *The Cruel Sea*; the leader of a commando mission drinking himself senseless on the eve of the unit's departure for France in *Cockleshell Heroes* – the implication is always that in the

⁴²⁹ Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, p. 229.

morning the revellers will be sober and that their drinking does not interfere with their duties. However, two films released in 1958 – *Ice cold in Alex* (1958) and *The Key* (1958) – feature men whose drinking is clearly out of control.

Ice Cold in Alex is presented as the story of one man's war and the man in question is a less-than-idealised hero in the form of a hard-drinking ambulance driver, Captain Anson (John Mills), who, along with Sergeant-Major Pugh (Harry Andrews), must escort two nurses through the North African desert to safety during an Allied retreat.⁴³⁰ Having lost his precious supplies of whisky, Anson offers a lift to a certain Captain Van der Pohl (Anthony Quayle) because he is carrying several bottles of gin. As the story unfolds it is learned that Van der Pohl, who claims to be a South African officer, is actually a German Intelligence officer who is using a two-way radio to send information about Allied troop movements to the Germans. Although suspecting that Van der Pohl is not who he says he is, the other members of the crew allow him to accompany them to Alexandria before confronting him and handing him over as a surrendered prisoner-of-war rather than denouncing him as a spy.

Anson's drinking is very different from that of his predecessors such as Small and Ericson and is shown to threaten the safety of his crew: his rash decision to try to evade a German patrol results in the death of one of the nurses and the dangers of driving through a mine-field whilst drunk are pointed out to him by the surviving nurse, Sister Murdoch (Sylvia Syms). However, the film presents him as a man 'driven to the limits of endurance' by war, rather than a habitual alcoholic, something established by his sergeant who attributes his drinking to overwork and self-sacrifice.⁴³¹ Furthermore, Anson is afforded the opportunity to redeem himself when he vows not to touch alcohol again until they reach Alexandria safely and by the end of the film he is endowed, once more, with both sharp wits and a sense of authority as seen in the way

⁴³⁰ BFI Library, *Ice-Cold in Alex* medium press-book (1958)

⁴³¹ Ibid

he ensures that Van der Pohl is handed over as a prisoner-of-war and not arrested by an over-enthusiastic military policeman to be shot as a spy.

Anson's battle with the strains of warfare and his resultant dependence on alcohol is mirrored by the character of Captain Chris Ford (Trevor Howard) in *The Key* (1958) – the story of a succession of tug boat captains charged with the task of rescuing ships that have been disabled by enemy attack – who is clearly struggling to cope with the strain of carrying out highly dangerous, arguably near-suicidal, missions on an almost daily basis. He is clearly not only psychologically dependent on alcohol, but also emotionally dependent on Stella (Sophia Loren), the mysterious woman who accompanies a flat, the key to which is passed from one doomed captain to another. However, although Ford is not allowed the opportunity of redemption – being killed in action half way into the film – his courage is beyond doubt, unfailingly answering the call to attempt the rescue of stranded ships knowing that sooner or later he will not come back.

Both films achieved major box-office success and, while appearing to appeal to both sexes and all classes, would likely have been seen by slightly older audiences compared to some earlier combat-oriented films.⁴³² Reviews suggest that audiences might well have seen both men's battle with drink as part of a heroic refusal to give up, rather than as a sign of personal weakness. So, while Anson might be 'disintegrating under the influence of battle and alcohol', he is also 'the resourceful captain who knows he is drinking too much through battle weariness' and 'completely human, varying courage with drink, and knowing his own faults only too well'.⁴³³ Likewise, Ford's possession of 'a courage that is on the point of collapse', was seen as part of a 'study of men doing a job under the stress of extreme and chronic fear' in which they must 'control their fears and steel themselves for valour'.⁴³⁴

⁴³² *Kinematograph Weekly* 18 December 1958, *Daily Cinema* 30 May 1958, *Kinematograph Weekly* 5 June 1958, *Monthly Film Bulletin* July 1958, *Daily Cinema* 25 June 1958, August 1958

⁴³³ *Daily Mail* 27 June 1958, *Evening News* 26 June 1958, *Daily Cinema* 25 June 1958

⁴³⁴ *Times* 29 May 1958, *Daily Mail* 30 May 1958, *Daily Worker* 31 May 1958

9.2 Pirates of the Desert – *Sea of Sand*

Self-described as a 'band of pirates', the members of a unit of the Long-Range Desert Group (LRDG) in *Sea of Sand* (1958) exhibit none of the evidence of spit and polish demanded by leaders such as Small in *Angels One Five* or Fraser in *Above Us the Waves*. However, appearances are deceptive and while this irregularly-attired group might resemble a gang of cut-throats they are revealed to be ordinary men, volunteers on a hazardous mission, who are completely committed to the task but who would rather be back at home with their loved ones.

On one level *Sea of Sand* is a straightforward men-on-a-mission adventure story in which a motorised unit of the LRDG is sent behind enemy lines to destroy a fuel dump in advance of the attack on Tobruk. The mission is accomplished but six men are lost before they reach the fuel dump and another soldier is seriously wounded on the journey back. When the last vehicle runs out of fuel the remaining troops must continue on foot, both evading the pursuing Germans and enduring the heat of the desert. However, on another level it is a poignant exploration of the lives of this small group of men with what might be termed the 'home-front' element introduced by a number of photographs. The bitterness that Captain Cotton (Michael Craig) feels about his wife's infidelity is first indicated when a discarded picture of her is found torn up on the floor of their room by his fellow officer Captain Williams (John Gregson) whose own cherished picture of his son and only child is kept at all times in his breast pocket. White (Percy Herbert), it is revealed, carries a picture of his wife and four children and Matheson (Barry Foster) has a picture of a daughter he has yet to see. This knowledge of the men's lives makes their heroism, in particular the sacrifices made by White and Williams towards the end of the film, particularly poignant. First the wounded White pleads with his comrades to leave him behind so that he will not slow them down, additionally volunteering to carry out a suicidal ambush that will deplete the German troops and increase his comrades' chance of escape. He dies with his family photograph on view and the radio tuned to a British radio station. Later, Williams, at the cost of his life, deliberately draws the fire of a German patrol vehicle ensuring that

a nearby Allied patrol vehicle can take evasive action and ultimately carry his exhausted comrades back to their own lines: a sacrificial death that recalls those of the actor's other incarnations in uniform in *Angels One Five* and *Above Us the Waves*. In addition, the film contains the highly irreverent character of Brody (Richard Attenborough), a man who has little regard for regulations – he takes a water bottle full of whisky with him on the mission – and even less regard for rank. When asked by the recently-arrived Captain Williams whether anyone had ever spoken to him about the less-than-respectful way he speaks to officers he replies: 'Yes, officers mainly!'

The film achieved major box-office success with audiences that appear to have been made up of all classes and may have consisted of older children and adults despite the film's "U" certificate.⁴³⁵ Reviews suggest that audiences might well have remarked on the difference between Captain Cotton – the group was described as a 'bearded, buccaneering guerrilla gang' led by an 'informal, unshaven wartime officer' who 'dresses as scruffily as his men' – and earlier chivalric heroes, but that they were likely moved by the scenes of sacrifice, with one critic describing White's courageous last stand as '[a] brave death, but without false heroics' and another declaring that it would be 'a long time before I forget the wounded soldier left behind to ambush the Germans, looking at a photograph of his family propped up against his machine gun and listening to Vera Lynn coming over a portable radio.'⁴³⁶

9.3 Avoiding Responsibility – *Dunkirk*

A less-than-idealised depiction of the British at war can be seen in *Dunkirk* in which Corporal Tubby Binns (John Mills) appears a reluctant hero when he finds himself in sole charge of a group that has been cut off from its unit and declares: "I never wanted the blasted stripes in the first place!" In addition, another central character, Holden

⁴³⁵ *Kinematograph Weekly* 18 December 1958, *Kinematograph Weekly* 23 December 1958, *Monthly Film Bulletin* December 1958

⁴³⁶ *Sunday Express* 26 October 1958, *Times* 27 October 1958, *News of the World* 26 October 1958, *Daily Herald* 24 October 1958

(Richard Attenborough), the owner of a small engineering firm, is quite content to allow others to risk their lives while he makes a comfortable living selling belt buckles to the War Office. However, during the course of the film both men rise to the challenge of the situation: Binns leads his group successfully to the beaches of Dunkirk where Holden – having informed his wife that he cannot leave the fighting to others – has travelled as part of the flotilla of small boats ready to carry them off.

A less idealised tone to the film as a whole can also be seen in the film's depiction of the withdrawal to and the evacuation from Dunkirk with a clear assertion by one of the characters, Foreman (Bernard Lee), that a lack of planning and organisation had resulted in a state of chaos. Such criticism caused unease, if not consternation, among former and serving military personnel. A serving officer and veteran of the campaign engaged by the War Office to check the script declared it 'a travesty of a major campaign' in which the story was 'woven, in a biased manner, round a rather ordinary group of 6 lost sappers' and a war correspondent engaged by the film's producer Michael Balcon to 'check the script for historical accuracy' concluded that a revised script remained 'a monstrous travesty of history' opining that Binns and his charges constituted an 'unrepresentative and unlovable body of men'.⁴³⁷ On the film's release there was further disquiet from, amongst others, Lord Burnham – who as Brigadier, the Honourable EF Lawson, had been involved in defending the perimeter at Dunkirk – the managing director of the *Daily Telegraph* who printed several letters suggesting that the film gave a misleading impression of the events including a self-penned letter in which he complained that '[in] the confused masses on the dunes there is no sign of any ordered procedure, nor do we see a single officer', adding '[my] recollection is different'.⁴³⁸ The producer and director responded to this and to other letters arguing that the film presented 'a balanced picture of Dunkirk as it was – chaotic and orderly, dejected and optimistic, heroic and fearful'.⁴³⁹ It would appear that the producers realised that they had to reach some form of compromise with the War Office, not

⁴³⁷ National Archive, WO 32/16917 Facilities for Ealing Films Ltd "Dunkirk"; MacKenzie, 'Victory from Defeat', p. 245.

⁴³⁸ *Daily Telegraph* 24 March 1958

⁴³⁹ *Daily Telegraph* 26 March 1958

only because of the need for assistance but also because departing too far from the 'patriotic, middle-class conventions' of the time would risk alienating audiences, thus explaining not only the way troops are always 'shown in a positive light' – and the assertion by Foreman that whoever is to blame for the mess, it is not the Army – but also the casting of the 'conventionally heroic figure' of John Mills.⁴⁴⁰

Dunkirk was an outstanding box-office success and likely attracted the sort of inclusive and family audiences that appear to have enjoyed films such as *The Dam Busters* and *Above Us the Waves*.⁴⁴¹ Reviews suggest that rather than finding Binns 'unrepresentative and unloveable' the British public took this everyman figure to their hearts, applauding the 'stumbling progression ... from fuddled incapacity to mild authority' of this 'resourceful and courageous' man who, though 'thrown unprepared into leadership' succeeded in 'bringing his men to safety'.⁴⁴² Furthermore, it would appear from reviews that audiences did indeed recognise the optimism and heroism among the chaos and fear, as Balcon and Norman had hoped they would, seeing the film as a tribute to the British people showing 'the united will to win' and 'a sustained cheer for the enduring courage of the British people in the face of ridiculous odds'.⁴⁴³

9.4 Sitting out the War – *Danger Within*

Prisoners-of-war in films such as *The Wooden Horse*, *Albert RN* and *The Colditz Story* appear to accept without question that it is the duty of imprisoned officers to do everything they can to try to escape. Indeed, as one writer has pointed out, heroic status is conferred on those who are dedicated to escape.⁴⁴⁴ However, a much less idealised picture of the British prisoner-of-war can be seen in *Danger Within* (1958) in

⁴⁴⁰ MacKenzie, 'Victory from Defeat', pp. 250-1.

⁴⁴¹ *Kinematograph Weekly* 18 December 1958, *Kinematograph Weekly* 27 March 1958, *Monthly Film Bulletin* May 1958, *Daily Cinema* 21 March 1958

⁴⁴² *Manchester Guardian* 22 March 1958, *Kinematograph Weekly* 27 September 1958, *Sunday Despatch* 23 September 1958

⁴⁴³ *Daily Telegraph* 25 September 1958, *Daily Herald* 21 September 1958

⁴⁴⁴ Gerahty, p. 183.

which most of the officers – estimated by one escape enthusiast as ninety per cent of them – seem quite content to sit out the war sunbathing, playing cards, painting, engaging in amateur dramatics or, most bizarrely, exploring the camp's sewerage system. In addition, many of the prisoners are openly hostile to escape enthusiasts, describing them as 'cloak and dagger types' whose actions, they fear, will endanger everyone else. As one declares: 'Why does there have to be some comic-strip hero in every camp who has to go and muck things up for everyone else?' In addition, another of the conventions of the prisoner-of-war genre – that British officers are unswervingly patriotic – is undermined when it becomes clear that a suspected traitor must be British. However, towards the end of the film the escape committee establishes itself as the prisoners' saviour – putting into effect a plan that will see all prisoners evacuated from the camp – when it is realised that the imminent Italian surrender poses a serious threat to the prisoners' lives. Even so they need 'a spirited performance of "Hamlet"' from the amateur dramatists to distract the guards and there are a number of card players who feel it is 'a pity' that there will be no more games of bridge.⁴⁴⁵

Danger Within failed at the box-office, making it the first prisoner-of-war film to do so.⁴⁴⁶ Reviews suggest the film was seen as departing from the conventions of the prisoner-of-war film – 'something new in escape stories' in that 'a proportion of the inmates obviously prefer to sunbathe, loaf, play bridge and prepare to play Hamlet rather than return to a life a danger' and 'the first escape story ... which has suggested that prisoner-of-war camps were not made up exclusively of eager tunnellers: that there were quiet ones who didn't want to escape at all and at times found the heartier incurable escapers a bit of a nuisance' – and it would appear that cinema audiences preferred prisoner-of-war films that privileged the escapers throughout.⁴⁴⁷

Conclusion

⁴⁴⁵ *Daily Express* 21 February 1959

⁴⁴⁶ *Kinematograph Weekly* 18 December 1958

⁴⁴⁷ *Evening Standard* 19 February 1959, *Daily Mail* 20 February 1959

The Servicemen depicted in the films considered in this chapter clearly differ – with their reliance on alcohol, scruffy appearance, tendency to avoid responsibility and willingness to sit out the war in a prisoner-of-war camp – from their early-1950s predecessors. However, these men, or at least most of them, still display many of the qualities possessed by their chivalric forebears: courage, loyalty and tenacity. As such, these films are not so much a challenge to the myth of the British at war developed earlier in the decade but an affectionate and respectful revision of it.

The box-office success of all but one of these films suggests that British cinema-goers were quite happy with these less-idealised depictions of the British at war so long as Service personnel displayed, by the end of the film if not at the beginning, the expected qualities of courage, loyalty and tenacity. As such, the failure of *Danger Within* suggests that audiences were unhappy with a prisoner-of-war film in which prisoners were not firmly committed to, or at least fully supportive of, escape attempts. In addition, the departure from the idealised accounts of the British Serviceman can be seen to have affected the likely age-related composition of audiences. *Ice-Cold in Alex*, *The Key* and *Sea of Sand* may have attracted audiences consisting of adults and adolescents with only *Dunkirk* attracting the sort of family audiences previously seen attending *The Dam Busters* and *Above Us the Waves*.

Chapter 10 – A Departure from Authenticity

A number of terms – authenticity, restraint, sincerity, truthfulness and honesty – appear frequently in reviews, and not only in the quality press, of British Second World War films from the 1950s, particularly during the first half of the decade. These terms are used, approvingly, to describe films – not only those based on specific historical events or people such as *The Dam Busters*, *The Colditz Story* and *Above Us the Waves*, but also to those based on more general events featuring fictitious characters, such as *Angels One Five*, *Gift Horse* and *The Cruel Sea* – that eschew any sort of exaggeration or falsehood: in particular, the sort of false heroics many British film critics felt was characteristic of Hollywood. That film-makers recognised that audiences expected authenticity can be seen from the opening captions of *The Colditz Story* with what almost amounts to an apology for occasional historical inaccuracies – ‘composite characters’, ‘imaginary characters’ and ‘incidents [that] have been simplified or are related out of their historical context’ – that, publicity material explains, were required in order to produce a storyline suited to the cinema.⁴⁴⁸ Indeed, such was the requirement for authenticity that it has been argued that any departure from the truth would have been regarded as sacrilegious.⁴⁴⁹

A group of films released in 1958 sees the beginning of a movement towards the abandonment of authenticity that would eventually lead to the ‘pure fiction’ of many 1960s war films.⁴⁵⁰ A review of 1955s *Cockleshell Heroes* appears to anticipate this movement and suggests that films with more exaggerated and imaginative storylines might have an international appeal:

“The Dam Busters” is a perfect “British” film, authentic, restrained, sincere and therefore to British audiences deeply moving. In its own country the film has no need to plead its entertainment qualities. “Cockleshell Heroes” is equally factual and realistic. It is sincere and restrained, an admirable tribute to a fine British enterprise of war. But the producers of “Cockleshell Heroes” have

⁴⁴⁸ BFI Library, *The Colditz Story* Film Programmes Collection, Film Premier Programme (1955)

⁴⁴⁹ Chapman, ‘Our Finest Hour Revisited’, p. 69.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 67.

not allowed their respect for sincerity and truth to blind them to the fact that entertainment has to be just a shade larger than life. They dramatise the personalities of the film. They exaggerate at times, but well within the limits of credibility. This is the factor that will make the film more likely to have success in countries where for a film to be perfectly British is not enough.⁴⁵¹

In the five films considered in this chapter, this departure from factually-based narratives takes two basic forms: adding an entirely fictitious ending to actual, documented events, as in *I Was Monty's Double* or spinning an actual or realistic event into an almost entirely fictitious narrative, as in *The Battle of the V1* (1958) and *Operation Amsterdam* (1958), sometimes stretching credibility to its limit, as in *The Two-Headed Spy* (1958) and *No Time to Die* (1958). However, it should not be thought that film-makers had concluded that authenticity no longer mattered to audiences, as many of these films provide fascinating examples of attempts to persuade audiences of their films' veracity even where their storylines defied credibility.

10.1 Fictitious Appendages – *I Was Monty's Double*

I Was Monty's Double is based on an actual attempt to deceive the Germans by using an actor, Clifford James (played by the actor himself), to make an appearance in North Africa impersonating Field-Marshal Montgomery in order to convince the Germans that the forthcoming Allied invasion would take place in southern Europe. However, the film contains an entirely fabricated ending whereby the fictitious Montgomery is kidnapped by German commandos and then rescued following a shoot-out on a beach.

The fictional ending caused considerable unease at the War Office. Having been informed that the Field-Marshal would have no involvement at all in the making of the film – Montgomery's desire that the story not be filmed had contributed to the abandonment of an earlier attempt to film Clifton-Webb's book – the film's new

⁴⁵¹ *Evening News* 17 November 1955

producers were additionally informed that the inclusion of the fictional ending was considered entirely inappropriate as it would reflect badly 'on the efficiency of War Office security arrangements' and, indeed, make 'a ridicule of the whole cover plan'.⁴⁵²

It is worthy of note that the film's fictional ending was anticipated by the ending of *The Man Who Never Was* in which a spy is sent to investigate whether a body washed up on a Spanish beach is that of a Royal Marine officer. As such, *The Man Who Never Was* is doubly significant in marking a turning point in the nature of British war and war-related films.

10.2 Imaginative Stories of Resistance: *The Battle of the V1* and *Operation Amsterdam*

A cycle of films – *Traitor* (1957), *The Battle of the V1*, *Operation Amsterdam*, *The Angry Hills* (1959) – based on the secretive world of resistance activity, and therefore not surprisingly based on imaginative storylines – appears during the second half of the decade. Of these *The Battle of the V1* and *Operation Amsterdam* – both based very broadly on actual events: the development of the V1 and Allied efforts to prevent the Germans from obtaining supplies of industrial materials respectively – provide particularly interesting examples of film-makers seeking to persuade audiences that the events they are watching on screen actually happened, not only by their use of opening captions and actuality footage but also by the inclusion of scenes that recall particular documentary drama films from the war years, a sub-genre particularly noted for its veracity.

Battle of the V1 begins with actuality footage and opening captions that are additionally voiced over that refer to a Parliamentary statement made by Winston Churchill in 1944 to the effect that reports of German efforts to develop a bomb to be used to attack London had been received the previous year 'through our many and varied Intelligence sources'. This is followed by an assurance and dedication: 'The

⁴⁵² National Archives, W/O 32/16478 Facilities for Film "I Was Monty's Double" Marksman Films Ltd

incidents depicted in this film are in all essentials true. To the heroes of the Polish Underground and the unknown secret agents, who helped to save London, we dedicate this picture.'

Whilst not doubting that Intelligence sources in Poland might well have been involved in passing information about the development of the V1 to Britain, audiences might have been curious as to the exact meaning of the phrase 'in all essentials true.' Two Poles conscripted for 'volunteer labour' are asked by the Polish Resistance to look out for anything unusual when they are sent away to what seems to be an ordinary munitions factory. Noticing what appear to be pilotless aeroplanes, they contact the local Resistance, whereupon messages are relayed to London and RAF bombers destroy the factory. When production of the weapons is resumed out of the range of Allied bombers in eastern Poland, the pair is sent there to continue their work. Soon after their arrival a V1 crashes and explodes near to where they are living and, not long afterwards, they are able to grant London its wish to see a complete weapon when another one lands nearby, this time without exploding. The scenes that follow could certainly be said to stretch credibility. Local farmers conceal the unexploded weapon by dragging it into a river and then drag it out again in order for it to be diffused using what few domestic tools can be found. The whole rocket is then disassembled, packed in crates and picked up by a large and heavy British plane that can only take off after a collective effort from the local villagers manages to free the plane from soft ground. However, despite lacking credibility these final scenes have at least an appearance of authenticity as they largely rehearse the ending of *Now It Can Be Told/School for Danger* in which local villagers come out in force and manage to free a Lysander light-aircraft that has sunk into soft ground.

Similar techniques are used to assure audiences of the veracity of *Operation Amsterdam*, an account of Dutch Resistance efforts to prevent the Germans capturing supplies of industrial diamonds. Beginning with opening captions that outline a timetable of events that took place in May 1940 – Hitler's invasion of Holland,

Churchill's appointment as Prime Minister and a special mission 'to get all the industrial diamonds out of Amsterdam before the Germans took over the city' – audiences are informed that this mission was undertaken 'with such speed and secrecy that no written word of it ever appeared in the official files of the War Cabinet.'

Two Dutch diamond experts who have been living in England are accompanied by a British Intelligence officer to Amsterdam where, having picked up along the way a suicidal young woman who works for the Dutch War Office, they seek to persuade all the diamond merchants in the city to hand over their supplies of industrial diamonds lest they fall into the hands of the Germans. The plot also involves the Dutch Army plagued by collaborators and members of the Dutch Resistance whose expertise in explosives is called upon when it is realised that many of the diamonds in the city are held in a time-locked safe at the central bank which, Monday being a public holiday, will not open until Tuesday when the destroyer waiting patiently for them just offshore will have left and the Germans will probably have arrived. Similarities between *Operation Amsterdam* and *The Foreman Went to France* (1942) have been noted and *Operation Amsterdam* includes a sequence that is largely a reworking of scenes contained in the earlier wartime documentary-drama, also a film about an attempt to deprive the Germans of industrial equipment.⁴⁵³ Here, as the film's main protagonists head towards the port they encounter a column of refugees fleeing in the same direction that comes under fire from a fighter aircraft, killing a number of them including a young boy who had tried to save a horse.

The use of opening captions that assert the veracity of the film's storyline – describing events as 'in all essential true' or claiming that they were so secret that no written word of them ever appeared in the official files – and the inclusion of scenes that consciously recall wartime documentary-dramas to evoke their authenticity and realism are clear evidence that film-makers were convinced that it was still important that audiences believed that what they were seeing on the screen was a reasonably

⁴⁵³ Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, p. 212.

truthful account of wartime events even when a great deal of imagination had gone into the film's storyline. As the next pair of films shows, this applied even when the film's storyline stretched credibility to its limits.

10.3 Stretching Credibility to the Limits: *The Two-Headed Spy* and *No Time to Die*

Like many films released during the 1950s, *The Two-Headed Spy* begins with an opening dedication:

To those men of the intelligence service who worked in secrecy, who struggled and died in darkness, to those lonely and courageous men who risked their lives daily in the enemy camp, this picture is dedicated. And to one of those men – Col. A.P. Scotland OBE, British Intelligence Service, whose exploits over the past half century inspired this story, we wish to express our thanks.

Reading this caption, audiences might well have thought that they were about to watch a largely factual account of the wartime experiences of Colonel Alexander Scotland and the script includes a foreword describing the events as 'part of the true story of how the Allies secured secret information from inside Germany.'⁴⁵⁴ However, as the film continued few would have accepted as factual a storyline in which Scotland (Jack Hawkins), born of English and German parents, rises through the ranks of the German Army to become a general serving on Hitler's General Staff while all the time operating as a British agent passing on high-level information via an elderly Berlin antiques dealer. Furthermore, only the most credulous would have been prepared to believe that when his contact is killed, his replacement would be a night-club singer, with whom he becomes romantically attached, who relays information to the Allies via ingeniously composed songs broadcast on German Services radio.

The inspiration for this highly inventive storyline was in fact a misunderstanding resulting from Scotland's reply to two questions put to him at the trial of Albert

⁴⁵⁴ BFI Library, S.10630 *The Two-Headed Spy* final shooting script (24/3/58)

Kesselring in Venice in 1947. Asked if he had ever served in the German Army and whether information on the German Army had been his 'function' during the Second World War he had replied in the affirmative to both questions and newspapers had seized on this and published headlines to the effect that Scotland had served on Hitler's General Staff.⁴⁵⁵ Scotland had addressed this misunderstanding in his memoir "The London Cage", published in 1957, explaining that he had served as an officer in the German army during the Hottentots wars in South Africa between 1903 and 1907, served as a British officer during the First World War, on occasion operating behind enemy lines, and had spent the Second World War interrogating enemy agents in the South Kensington interrogation centre known as the "London Cage", adding that his attempts 'to nip firmly in the bud any further imaginative efforts at spreading the notion that I had served in Hitler's Army' had been blocked with 'a surprise order from Whitehall'.⁴⁵⁶

Despite the film's lack of veracity, Scotland and the film's producers had attempted to obtain a statement from the War Office to the effect that *Two-Headed Spy* was a factual account of his military service during the Second World War.⁴⁵⁷ However, the War Office, at one point quoting from Scotland's memoir, clearly had no intention of awarding the film its seal of approval as a letter addressed to Scotland shows: 'I am to say that the War Office has no security objection to the film but cannot accept as accurate the note to the effect that the script is based on the true life story of Colonel Scotland. The War Office can accept no responsibility for the views and events portrayed in this film.'⁴⁵⁸ Furthermore, a subsequent letter dismissed the film's plot as a 'fictitious story', insisting that Scotland not refer to himself as a member of the British Intelligence Service in connection with the film (although this was ignored) and

⁴⁵⁵ AP Scotland, *The London Cage* (London: Evans Brothers Ltd, 1957), pp. 11-14, pp. 184-5.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 184-5.

⁴⁵⁷ National Archive, WO 32/1625 Facilities for the Film "Britain's Two Headed Spy" RKO Radio Pictures Ltd

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

forbidding any representation from former members of the British Intelligence Service.⁴⁵⁹

One note is particularly significant as it indicates that the War Office was clearly aware that its endorsement of a film would assure audiences of the film's authenticity, and that such assurances were vital to the film's prospects of success:

Their problem was that they had entered into negotiations and signed contracts etc. for the making of this film and wished to go into production as soon as possible, but were concerned with the fact that the War Office would not accept as accurate their recently submitted script. Apparently there is little commercial interest in such a film if it is made from a fictional script and they require our aid to give it an aspect of authenticity.⁴⁶⁰

An equally incredible storyline features in *No Time to Die* (1958) in which a break-out from a prisoner-of-war camp is led by Sergeant David Thatcher (Victor Mature), a man who must evade the Gestapo on account of having injured Joseph Goebbels in a failed assassination attempt. Furthermore, Thatcher is ultimately assisted by the camp's deputy-commandant who, before shooting himself because he is appalled by the Gestapo's treatment of captured prisoners, provides the escapees with a map, a compass and an escape route. Members of the audience who suspected that the film-makers were making it up as they went along would not have been too far wide of the mark as plans to make a film about an epic tank battle intercut with stories of the men's lives had to be revised significantly owing to an insufficient numbers of tanks being available.⁴⁶¹ In the final version, only the brief tank battles that take up around ten of the film's ninety minutes have any authenticity to them and, in view of this, it would seem reasonable to conclude that the brevity of the opening caption – 'To the War Office, the Royal Armoured Corps and the Queen's Bays (2nd Dragoon Guards) who made possible the tank sequences, we extend our grateful thanks' – and its

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁶¹ National Archive, WO 32/16026 Facilities for the Film "No Time to Die" Warwick Film Productions Ltd

specific reference to the 'tank sequences' suggest that the War Office would grant its endorsement only to this small part of the film.

Clearly, film-makers were moving away from factually-based narratives towards far more imaginative depictions of the Second World War: adding fictional endings to otherwise factually-based accounts; taking actual events and creating almost entirely fictional storylines and creating narratives that defy credibility. At the same time it is clear that film-makers believed that audiences expected authenticity and were at pains to ensure – through the use of opening captions, War Office endorsements and references to wartime documentary-dramas – that audiences were convinced of the veracity of their films.

In terms of audience reaction, estimations of commercial success suggest that audiences might have viewed less favourably films based on such imaginative storylines, with only two films – *Battle of the V1* and *No Time to Die*: likely appealing, respectively, to older audiences of all classes and to younger and less sophisticated audiences – achieving major box-office success: something of a low success rate in a year that combat-oriented war films proved particularly popular.⁴⁶² Reviews suggest that the films' authenticity would have been a talking point among audiences that were somewhat bemused by the issue. While the ending to *I Was Monty's Double* was described by one critic as 'phony', another felt it was entirely justified as it 'rounds off the adventure in breathless style.'⁴⁶³ In a similar vein, *Battle of the V1* was described as both 'based on well-documented facts' and 'a mixture of documentary fact and highly-coloured fiction', while one critic was left entirely unconvinced, declaring that it was 'a pity that the film should claim to be based on facts since it has obviously wandered far from any such base.'⁴⁶⁴ Likewise, *Operation Amsterdam* was described as a 'true story' by one critic with another countering that it was 'incredible' and another of those

⁴⁶² *Kinematograph Weekly* 18 December 1958, *Kinematograph Weekly* 17 December 1959, *Kinematograph Weekly* 1 May 1958, *Monthly Film Bulletin* June 1958, *Daily Cinema* 25 April 1958, *Kinematograph Weekly* 24 April 1958

⁴⁶³ *Daily Sketch* 17 October 1958, *Evening News* 16 October 1958

⁴⁶⁴ *People* 13 July 1958, *Daily Sketch* 11 July 1958, *Guardian* 12 July 1958

`unbelievable real-life missions'.⁴⁶⁵ However, it would appear that few people if any were prepared to accept as true the events detailed in *The Two-Headed Spy*, with one critic declaring, tongue-in-cheek, it `seems incredible – but [it] actually happened', another declaring that although `based on fact' it `seem[s] most unlikely', and a third describing it as `strong in excitement if not verisimilitude'.⁴⁶⁶ *No Time to Die* appears to have similarly failed to convince audiences of its veracity. One reviewer described it as a `blend of fact and fiction', another reported that `a company of men from the Royal Armoured Corps', presumably invited along to give their endorsement, had laughed throughout the screening and a third dismissed the film as `a game of cowboys and Indians played out in the desert'.⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶⁵ *Daily Sketch* 16 January 1959, *Daily Mirror* 16 January 1959

⁴⁶⁶ *Daily Mirror* 21 November 1958, *Reynolds News* 23 November 1958, *Guardian* 22 November 1958

⁴⁶⁷ *Kinematograph Weekly* 24 April 1958, *Evening Standard* 18 April 1958, *Daily Worker* 19 April 1958

Chapter 11 – Continuity

Introduction

Although a clear departure from many of the conventions of British war films from the early 1950s can be seen by the second half of the decade, there is also an element of continuity. This is most clearly apparent in two films in which Kenneth More assumes the mantle of the “gentle knight”, playing the sort of chivalric hero epitomised earlier in the decade by Jack Hawkins. It can also be seen in a number of films in which the theme of the “good German” is further developed, although the way this is done in one film certainly constitutes change.

11.1 A New “Gentle Knight” – *Reach for the Sky* and *Sink the Bismarck!*

The years 1956 to 1960 see the chivalric heroes largely pushed aside by hard-bitten and cynical characters such as Howard in *Count Five and Die* and Langford in *Yesterday's Enemy*, less idealised characters such as Ford in *The Key* and comic rogues like Cox in *Private's Progress*. Indeed, the actors who played such characters appear to have sought to avoid type-casting. Jack Hawkins' Warden in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* appears to see war as an exciting game and his embittered Hyde in *The League of Gentlemen* is clearly intentional casting against the type of role he made his own seven or eight years earlier. John Mill's alcoholic Anson in *Ice Cold in Alex* is a far cry from Fraser in *Above Us the Waves* or Reid in *The Colditz Story* and Richard Todd's Baird in *Danger Within* possesses a steely determination rather than the boyish enthusiasm of Gibson in *The Dam Busters*. However, the second half of the decade sees the appearance of a chivalric hero in the shape of Kenneth More in *Reach for the Sky* and *Sink the Bismarck!*

As opening captions and closing words proclaim, *Reach for the Sky*, the story of Douglas Bader the wartime hero who played a leading role in the Battle of Britain despite having lost both legs in a flying accident, is a tribute to a man whose courage in times of both peace and war created 'strength and hope out of disaster' and made him 'a legend in his own lifetime'. It is significant that More injects a certain cheerfulness and amiability into his portrayal of a man whose single-minded determination could, as script writer and director Lewis Gilbert later reflected, make him difficult to work with and whose tendency towards solitariness had caused him to miss the film's premiere.⁴⁶⁸ As with Richard Todd's portrayal of Guy Gibson, More's Bader was clearly intended as a man that cinema audiences would like as well as respect.

The film was an outstanding box-office success, the top attraction for the year, and was likely enjoyed by the sort of inclusive, family audiences that had flocked to see *The Dam Busters* the year before.⁴⁶⁹ Reviews suggest that audiences saw the film as a tribute to Bader, both as a war hero and as a man of immense courage and determination: 'a heart-lifting experience', 'one of the heroic stories of our time', a tale of 'victory over adversity' featuring 'one of the greatest airmen among the heroic few' who was 'a legend in his own lifetime'.⁴⁷⁰ Reviews also suggest that audiences had warmed to More's portrayal of Bader: 'cheerful' and 'breezy' with a 'school-boyish manner' and 'gin-and-tonic approach to life'.⁴⁷¹ Significantly, as their views might have reflected those of audiences, two critics felt it did not matter whether or not More's Bader was an accurate representation of the man himself: one suggested that More's Bader might be 'a great deal more like the popular conception of Bader than Bader is himself' and another that authenticity of character was unimportant because the actor

⁴⁶⁸ Gilbert, pp. 157-63; Lewis Gilbert interview (July 1990) in *An Autobiography of British Cinema* pp. 221-2

⁴⁶⁹ *Kinematograph Weekly* 13 December 1956, *Kinematograph Weekly* 7 June 1956, *Monthly Film Bulletin* July 1956, *Today's Cinema* 6 June 1956

⁴⁷⁰ *News of the World* 8 July 1956, *Daily Telegraph* 9 July 1956, *Sunday Express* 8 July 1956, *Evening Standard* 5 July 1956, *Daily Herald* 6 July 1956

⁴⁷¹ *Observer* 8 July 1956, *News of the World* 8 July 1956, *Daily Worker* 7 July 1956, *Manchester Guardian* 7 July 1956, *Sunday Express* 8 July 1956

had captured 'the spirit of those British characteristics of which Bader is in so many ways the epitome.'⁴⁷²

Released at the end of the period under consideration, *Sink the Bismarck!* begins with actuality footage that is used not only to establish its authenticity but also to bring audiences 'up to speed' about the war nearly twenty years after the events depicted.⁴⁷³ More plays the fictitious character of Captain John Shepard, the recently-appointed Director of Operations controlling events from the Admiralty War Rooms located 200 feet below ground, charged with locating and destroying the Bismarck, the pride of the German Navy. This task requires a calculated and detached approach: a job ideally suited, according to the First Sea Lord, to a man 'as cold as a witch's heart'. It soon seems that Shepard is such a man: reassigning ships escorting troop carriers with 20,000 men on board, assessing coolly that 'it would involve some risk', and refusing a plea for leniency when he learns that enforcing a punishment watch will result in a junior officer being unable to say farewell to his girlfriend before she leaves for an overseas posting because 'either you have discipline or you don't'; reflecting that emotions are nothing more than 'a peacetime luxury'.

However, Shepard is a dedicated leader who expects the same sacrifices from himself as he does from others: he has a camp bed set up in his office so that he can work around the clock and he does not hesitate to reassign the Ark Royal to the hunt for the Bismarck despite his son being on the ship. In addition, it becomes apparent that Shepard, whose 'formal, abrupt, withdrawn' behaviour is in part the result of losing his wife in a bombing raid, is shielding a very human side to his character that makes him very different from ruthless leaders such as Howard in *Count Five and Die*.⁴⁷⁴ When his son is reported missing in action it is clear that, despite outward appearances, he is deeply troubled, and, when he receives news that his son has been picked up, becomes briefly overwhelmed. The camera seems complicit in Shepard's attempts to

⁴⁷² *Daily Worker* 7 July 1956, *Financial Times* 9 July 1956

⁴⁷³ Gilbert, p. 198.

⁴⁷⁴ *Observer* 4 February 1960

hide his emotions: his tears are masked by his handkerchief and viewed only fleetingly in a mirror, but his sobs are clearly audible. His icy exterior also thaws in the presence of his assistant, Second Officer Anne Davis (Dana Wynter), who turns down the offer of an appointment in the United States to stay with him, and he shows a fatherly concern for a young rating who had reported for duty despite being unwell because he did not want to miss the action. The film ends with the Bismarck sunk and Shepard having established himself as not only as a formidable military leader but also as a man with a human side. Again, More had created a military hero that audiences would like as well as respect.

Sink the Bismarck! was an outstanding box-office success and was likely viewed by the same sort of inclusive, family audiences that had flocked to More's earlier successful war film, *Reach for the Sky* and reviews suggest that audiences may have experienced the same sort of emotions as they did when watching the earlier film.⁴⁷⁵ One critic assured audiences that this 'fine picture ... will send you away with your heart filled with pride' and others had clearly warmed to the character of Shepard, at least by the end of the film, by which time More had returned to 'his old friendly self' playing this 'likeable' character.⁴⁷⁶ Indeed, one critic applauded 'the beautiful discipline and sensitivity of More's stern captain.'⁴⁷⁷

Two critics from the quality press would, no doubt, have been particularly dismayed by the film's popularity, describing it as 'dated and detached ... simply not part of our time' and 'an incredibly old fashioned film; almost as though one were watching a 1940 piece of flag-waving instead of a 1960 piece of drama ... [not] the kind of adventure yarn today's cinemagoers want.'⁴⁷⁸ Although such views could be dismissed as untypical of mainstream cinema-goers, they do suggest that the film can be seen as something of an anachronism. Indeed, the film was later described as 'one last hurrah

⁴⁷⁵ *Kinematograph Weekly* 15 December 1960, *Kinematograph Weekly* 11 February 1960, *Daily Cinema* 5 February 1960, *Monthly Film Bulletin* March 1960

⁴⁷⁶ *News of the World* 14 February 1960, *Sight and Sound* Spring 1960, *Observer* 4 July 1956

⁴⁷⁷ *Evening News* 11 February 1960

⁴⁷⁸ *Sight and Sound* Spring 1960, *Films and Filming* March 1960

for the big naval war film’ and something that ‘looks like a reversion to the films of the early 1950s.’⁴⁷⁹

One writer has suggested that assumptions of homogeneity regarding 1950s war films result from a focus on a small group of films – ‘the prestige and box-office success of a handful of films – *The Cruel Sea*, *The Colditz Story*, *The Dam Busters*, *Reach for the Sky*, *The Battle of the River Plate* and *Sink the Bismarck!* – has left a misleading impression of uniformity’ – and herein lies the significance of *Sink the Bismarck!*⁴⁸⁰ If the most commercially successful films of the 1950s were arrayed in chronological order, the presence of *Sink the Bismarck!* at, figuratively speaking, the end of the line makes it easier to overlook the differences between later films such as *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, *Ice Cold in Alex* and *Dunkirk* and films such as *Angels-One-Five*, *The Colditz Story*, *The Dam Busters* and *Reach for the Sky*.

11.2 Further Examples of the “Good German” – *The Battle of the River Plate*, *Ill Met by Moonlight* and *The One That Got Away*

Evidence of the British cinema seeking to draw a distinction between the fanatical Nazi and the ordinary German soldier or civilian can be seen as early as *Frieda* in 1947 and the prisoner-of-war films *Albert RN* and *The Colditz Story*, released between 1953 and 1955, develop this theme with the creation of sympathetic German guards. The second half of the decade sees several notable examples of the further development of this theme with sympathetic German soldiers and sailors in increasingly central roles. The commander of the Graf Spee, Captain Langsdorff (Peter Finch), in *The Battle of the*

⁴⁷⁹ MacKenzie, *British War Films 1939-1945*, p. 149.; Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, p. 224.

⁴⁸⁰ Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, p.205

River Plate (1957) is an honourable man as demonstrated by his treatment of prisoners, as is the kidnapped General (Marius Goring) in *Ill Met by Moonlight* (1957). Both films did well at the box-office and were likely viewed by inclusive family audiences, although, as the points of appeal of these two films would appear to have been their exciting stories and spectacular scenery, it can be concluded only that the inclusion of sympathetic German characters in central roles did not prevent a film from being popular with British audiences.⁴⁸¹

The One That Got Away (1957) features a German airman as its central character, charting the captivity and eventual escape of the only British prisoner-of-war to make what is termed in conventional prisoner-of-war films a home-run, the German pilot Franz von Verra (Hardy Kruger). Here, the usual conventions of the prisoner-of-war film are reversed with Von Verra engaging in many of the activities previously seen in films such as *Wooden Horse*, *Albert* and *Colditz Story* including outwitting the security systems of various camps and detention centres and even the gentle baiting of the camp guards.

One critic posed the question of whether British audiences were ready to accept a German airman as the hero of a British war film and the film's makers had been divided as to whether to cast a German actor in the lead.⁴⁸² The film's box-office success suggests that they were, with the film proving popular and likely viewed by inclusive, family audiences.⁴⁸³ However, reviews suggest that some audience members might have had their reservations. So, while several critics used the term 'hero' to describe Von Verra, one by virtue of his display of 'sheer physical guts', others were less happy, with one expressing reservations about 'the kind of forgive-and-forget morality which many people will not find to their liking' and another denouncing von

⁴⁸¹ *Kinematograph Weekly* 12 December 1957, *Kinematograph Weekly* 1 November 1956, *Monthly Film Bulletin* December 1956, *Kinematograph Weekly* 31 January 1957, *Monthly Film Bulletin* March 1957

⁴⁸² *Daily Mirror* (undated clipping) in BFI Library, Roy Ward Baker Collection RWB/2/1 Cuttings Scrapbook; Roy Ward Baker, *The Director's Cut: A Memoir of 60 Years in Film and Television*, pp. 95-9.

⁴⁸³ *Kinematograph Weekly* 12 December 1957, *Kinematograph Weekly* 10 October 1957, *Today's Cinema* 10 October 1957, *Monthly Film Bulletin* November 1957

Verra as 'arrogant, boastful and a congenital liar', pointing out that as he was killed soon after his return to Germany his escape was largely futile.⁴⁸⁴

If Von Verra, as one critic put it, variously courted the audience's 'hatred, admiration and sympathy', the latter two would no doubt be on account of his determination to escape, even if it should cost him his life, earning him the sort of heroic status that is generally afforded the die-hard escaper in prisoner-of-war films.⁴⁸⁵ Furthermore, his greatest battles are not primarily against his Allied captors but against the forces of nature, surviving the elements in the Lake District and crossing a frozen river to reach the then neutral United States of America.

Further continuity can be detected in a reappearance of romance seen during the second half of the decade. Interestingly, none of the war-related romances of this period – *The Deep Blue Sea* (1956), *The Black Tent* (1956), *Sea Wife* (1957), *The Wind Cannot Read* (1958) and *Another Time, Another Place* (1958) - end happily, with some ending tragically.

⁴⁸⁴ *Times* (undated clipping), *Daily Mail* (undated clipping), *News of the World* (undated clipping), *Daily Herald* (undated clipping), *Sunday Express* (undated clipping) in RWB/2/1

⁴⁸⁵ *News Chronicle* (undated clipping) in RWB/2/1, Gerahty, p. 183.

Part 3 Conclusion

The changes and trends outlined in this section suggest that the second half of the decade should be seen as a distinctive period in the British cinema's representations of the Second World War. First, this period sees a far less restrained depiction of the war with a significant number of films showing it to have been brutal and merciless, depictions of war that were accompanied by the creation of a new type of hero: the tough, ruthless leader who has the necessary wherewithal to fight a dirty war. In addition, certain film-makers sought to explore the ethics of war and made what might be termed anti-war statements, although, for a number of reasons, no film discussed in this section could be described, unequivocally, as an anti-war film. Secondly, there is a much more irreverent and far less idealised treatment of the British at war evident in both the war comedies from this period and also in a number of conventional war films from the later years of the decade. However, it should be noted that the treatment afforded by the British cinema to the nation's Servicemen and women is generally affectionate and, in its way, respectful. Indeed, these films can be seen as contributing to a revision of the myth of the Blitz – one in which the Second World War was won not by idealised hero figures but by the ordinary Serviceman and woman – rather than to a counter-myth. Thirdly, there is clear evidence of a departure, in terms of storyline, from the authenticity that was, earlier in the decade, seen as an essential requirement, although it is also apparent that film-makers were still at pains to reassure audiences of their films' veracity.

However, there is also an element of continuity, particularly apparent in the two films – *Reach for the Sky* and *Sink the Bismarck!* – in which Kenneth More assumes the mantle of the gentle knight. Given the enormous popularity of these two films, it can be argued that this element of continuity has obscured the significant change in the nature of representations of the Second World War apparent during the second half of the 1950s.

The number of films released and the commercial success of many of them is evidence of a continued preoccupation with the Second World War and, offered the choice of very different representations of war, audiences were clearly happier with some representations than others. Depictions of the ordinary Serviceman and woman as hero proved largely popular and there is specific evidence from reviews of the combat-oriented *Ice-Cold in Alex*, *The Key*, *Sea of Sand* and *Dunkirk* and the comedy *Light Up the Sky* to suggest that audiences had taken such characters to their hearts. However, the limited success of films featuring the new breed of ruthless hero suggests that the same could not be said of these characters. Furthermore, although audiences seem to have had little objection to films that portrayed the war as brutal, they displayed little enthusiasm for films with overtly anti-war sentiments. In addition, audiences appear to have no longer regarded any departure from authenticity as sacrilege. Given that this period sees no diminution in audience affection for the chivalric heroes so popular earlier in the decade, it cannot be concluded that British cinema audiences had entirely reappraised their view of the recent conflict, but there is evidence to suggest that a period of reflection had taken place.

Conclusion

Representations of the Second World War on British cinema screens during the years 1946 to 1960 were many, varied and changed noticeably during this period. Given the way these representations of the war changed, it is instructive to divide the war and war-related films of this time into three distinct periods – characterised, respectively, by anxiety, tribute and reflection – and, in terms of the content of these films and often audience and critical reception, there is evidence at each of these three stages to support the assertion that the films of this fifteen-year period can be seen as the British cinema-going public seeking to come to terms with the momentous events they had so recently experienced.

During the years 1946 to 1951, the dominant mood – something that can perhaps be seen as reflecting tensions built up during five years of living with the daily fear of losing loved ones as well as present uncertainty about the future – is one of anxiety and fear. Domestic melodramas and crime thrillers at this time express anxiety about the disruption caused by war: fears that couples might be unable to rebuild their lives after years of separation and that men who have learned the arts of war might be unable to readjust to peacetime civilian life. This mood of anxiety and fear is also present in the handful of espionage thrillers that appeared soon after the war's end that confront audiences with the possibility that things might not have turned out as well as they did. In addition, the thematic darkness of many of these films is complemented by a visual darkness. Finally, although combat-oriented war films are rare at this time, it is possible to identify in some of them a thematic and visual darkness that distinguishes them from those made several years later. However, despite the mood of anxiety these films frequently end on an optimistic note that suggests that the British people can win the peace as well as the war: the returning British Serviceman has an inherent decency that leads him to reject crime, and couples are committed to each other and determined to rebuild their lives together. The popularity of many of these films suggests that audiences – at this time largely

comprised of adults – enjoyed the process of being confronted with their darkest fears only to be reassured by the end of the film. In addition, there is evidence from reviews to suggest that audiences engaged with issues such as couples facing difficulties after wartime separation, returning Servicemen being tempted into crime and the question of whether former enemies could be forgiven.

The years 1952 to 1955 are dominated by combat-oriented war films that can be viewed as the earliest attempt to create a cinematic narrative of the nation's recent experience of war. The overriding theme of this period is tribute, with films that show a grateful nation respectfully saluting – often with specific dedications to the men and women whose stories they tell – the courage and determination of those who fought and died during the conflict. A key requirement for films at this time is authenticity with opening or closing credits almost invariably containing an acknowledgement of the assistance received from the relevant branches of the Services that serve both as a seal of approval from the military and a guarantee of authenticity. This period sees the British cinema projecting an image of the British at war, not as invincible conquerors but as chivalric heroes. Another feature of this period is the restraint with which the ever-present theme of loss and sacrifice is treated: the loss of loved ones in films that include a home-front element and the sacrifices of courageous soldiers, sailors and airmen in films that focus mainly on military operations. Significantly, the vast majority of these films were commercially successful, some outstandingly, and there is plentiful evidence of audiences engaging with the theme of tribute. Indeed, given the inclusive, family audiences that appear to have flocked to see many of these films, the frequent references to tribute in reviews and suggestions that attending such films was part of one's patriotic duty, it would seem that British cinema-goers were overwhelmingly united in paying tribute to those who had fought and died in the service of their country.

A general change in the character of war and war-related films is apparent during the years 1956 to 1960. This period sees the British cinema reflecting on its previous

depictions of the Second World War and questioning some of the assumptions, implicit in earlier films, regarding the nature of war and the way the British had people fought the Second World War. A number of combat-oriented films present the war as brutal and fought by a new breed of cynical, hard-bitten leaders, and some of them might be said to make anti-war statements. Several comedies appear to question whether British Servicemen and women really were as keen and selfless in their pursuit of victory as earlier films suggested and a number of combat-oriented films present a much more rough-and-ready version of the British Serviceman at war. However, by the end of these films, British Service personnel have generally demonstrated their loyalty and courage. This period also sees the start of a movement away from the insistence on authenticity that had characterised the first half of the decade.

The variety of representations offered to cinema-goers at this time and the success of some but not all of these representations suggests a period of reflection on, rather than a complete reappraisal of, audience views of the recent conflict. The ordinary Serviceman as hero was embraced by audiences but not the new breed of ruthless military leader. Audiences seem to have been comfortable with harsher depictions of war but to have had little enthusiasm for overtly anti-war films. The chivalric hero retained his place in the hearts of audiences that were now prepared to tolerate some departure from authenticity.

Viewing films in this way makes possible a meaningful assessment of a number of assumptions and assertions made regarding the nature of cinematic representations of the Second World War during the period 1945-1960. Clearly, despite assertions to the contrary, the Second World War did not disappear from British cinema screens during the immediate post-war period, as evidenced by the large number of war-related films released between 1946 and 1950.⁴⁸⁶ Furthermore, when films from the 1950s are

⁴⁸⁶ Durnat, p. 83. Manvell, pp. 232. Boyce, p. 3.

divided into these two distinctive periods the assumption of homogeneity becomes increasingly difficult to support.⁴⁸⁷ There is a clear difference between the earlier films that feature idealised protagonists and leave questions about the ethics of war largely unexplored and later films that feature more rough-and-ready heroes and raise questions about the ethics of war.

Furthermore, British films clearly covered a range of war-related issues, something that might have been overlooked because the films that explored them did not prove popular with audiences: the plight of the peoples of mainland Europe whose lives were turned upside-down by war: men whose physical injuries left them with feelings of inadequacy, and the question of how to deal with men who had deserted their comrades. Again, the lack of attention afforded to films that failed at the box-office has contributed to assumptions of homogeneity regarding British cinema's representations of the Second World War. Indeed, it becomes increasingly clear that such assumptions result from a focus on a small group of commercially successful war films.⁴⁸⁸ In particular, it would appear that the focus has been on a number of films that proved extremely popular with inclusive, family audiences at the time of their release and that further established themselves in the national consciousness as a result of frequent screenings on television during the 1960s and 1970s.

Dividing 1950s films into these two distinct periods also enables a meaningful assessment to be made of two assertions regarding British war films of the 1950s: that they are evidence of escapist nostalgia and that they avoid the horror of war.⁴⁸⁹ On the first count, British war films from the first half of the 1950s have a reassuring quality to them by virtue of their creation of idealised heroes. However, this is part of the overriding theme of tribute, characteristic of films of this period. Indeed, it would be a mistake to view them as warm and comforting. Beneath the calm confidence and professionalism of the "gentle knights" lies an inner turmoil, a keen awareness of the

⁴⁸⁷ Manvell, pp. 309-21. Jeavons, p. 188. Durnat, p. 83-4.

⁴⁸⁸ Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War*, p. 205.

⁴⁸⁹ Anderson, pp. 236-7., Armes, pp. 177-9., Havardi, pp. 128-57.

responsibility they bear for the lives of others. In addition, these idealised heroes are largely absent during the second half of the decade, sometimes replaced by men who are quite capable of fighting a dirty war. On the second count, although films from the early 1950s might seem, on the surface, to provide little evidence with which to counter the assertion that the horror of war is underplayed in British war films, it should be noted that the suffering endured in war, the ever-present threat of death and loss, is masked by the restraint with which it is treated and is certainly not ignored. Furthermore, the second half of the decade provides many examples of films that present war as brutal and, arguably, even as folly.

In short, the commercial success of war and war-related films during the period 1946 to 1960 shows a preoccupation with the Second World War among British cinema-goers that lasted well beyond the conflict itself. Furthermore, the changing nature of war and war-related films during this period, when allied to their popularity and the specific instances of audiences engaging with the themes of anxiety, tribute and reflection, suggests strongly that cinema played a role in helping the British people come to terms with the momentous events through which they had recently lived.

Filmography and Bibliography

Films

Above Us the Waves (1955, d Ralph Thomas, p William Macquitty, s Robin Estridge, Certificate U)

A naval commander trains a team to attack the Tirpitz using underwater chariots but eventually leads a group of midget submarines in an attack on the German battleship.

Against the Wind (1948, d Charles Crichton, p Sidney Cole/Michael Balcon, s TEB Clarke, Certificate A)

Special Operations Executive agents must rescue a leading member of the Belgian underground.

Albert RN (1953, d Lewis Gilbert, p Daniel M Angel, s Vernon Harris/Guy Morgan, Certificate U)

In a prisoner-of-war camp for naval officers, a British officer comes up with a plan to construct a dummy that is used to fool the German guards during head-counts.

Angels One Five (1952, d George More O’Ferrall, p John Gossage/Derek Twist, s Derek Twist, Certificate U)

A base commander must ensure that everyone – pilots, control room and ground staff – is prepared for the forthcoming Battle of Britain.

The Angry Hills (1959, d Robert Aldrich, p Raymond Stross, s Al Bezzerides, Certificate A)

An American war correspondent is given a list of Greek patriots ready to rise up against the Germans and finds that he is pursued by the Gestapo.

Another Time, Another Place (1958, d Lewis Allen, p Lewis Allen/Joseph Kaufman, s Stanley Mann, Certificate A)

An American journalist grieving the loss of her lover in an explosion finds solace in the company of his wife.

Appointment in London (1952, d Philip Leacock, p Aubrey Baring/Maxwell Setton, s John Wooldridge/Robert Westerby, Certificate U)

A Squadron Leader battles against exhaustion and frayed nerves to keep aircrews focused on the job in hand.

Appointment with Venus (1951, d Ralph Thomas, p Betty E Box, s Nicholas Phipps, Certificate U)

A British commando unit is dispatched to prevent a prize cow from falling into the hands of the Germans.

The Battle of the River Plate (1957, d/p/s Michael Powell/Emeric Pressburger, Certificate U)

British warships force a German battleship to seek refuge in a neutral port.

The Battle of the V1 (1958, d Vernon Sewell, p George Maynard, s Jack Hanley/Eryk Wlodek, Certificate A)

Polish patriots infiltrate a factory where V1 rockets are being manufactured.

The Black Tent (1956, d Brian Desmond Hurst, p William MacQuitty, s Robert Maugham/Bryan Forbes, Certificate U)

An Englishman uncovers the truth behind his brother's death in wartime North Africa.

The Bridge on the River Kwai (1957, d David Lean, p Sam Spiegel, s Michael Wilson/Carl Foreman/Pierre Boule/Calder Willingham, Certificate U)

In a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp, the Senior British Officer orders his men to assist their captors with the building of a bridge that will be used to further the Japanese war effort.

Cage of Gold (1950, d Basil Dearden, p Michael Relph/ Michael Balcon, s Jack Whittingham, Certificate A)

A young woman's life is disrupted by the reappearance of a former lover, a decorated pilot who has now turned to crime.

The Camp on Blood Island (1958, d Val Guest, p Anthony Hinds, s John Manchip White/Val Guest, Certificate X)

Allied prisoners in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp must ensure that news of Japan's surrender is kept from the camp's brutal commandant.

The Captive Heart (1946, d Basil Dearden, p Michael Relph/Michael Balcon, s Angus MacPhail/Guy Morgan, Certificate A)

British prisoners-of-war captured at Dunkirk spend years separated from their loved ones back home while a Czech officer must keep his identity secret from the Gestapo.

Carve Her Name with Pride (1958, d Lewis Gilbert, p Daniel M Angel, p Vernon Harris/Lewis Gilbert, Certificate U)

After the death in action of her husband, a young woman volunteers for the Special Operations Executive and serves behind enemy lines in France.

Castle Sinister (1947, d Oscar Burn, p William Howard Borer, s Egan Storm, Certificate A)

An Intelligence officer investigating two mysterious deaths finds that German agents are behind ghostly goings-on at a Scottish castle.

Circle of Danger (1951, d Jacques Tourneur, p Joan Harrison/David E Rose, s Philip Macdonald, Certificate U)

An American businessman travels to Britain to discover the truth about how his brother died while serving with a British commando unit.

Circle of Deception (1960, d Jack Lee, p Tom Morahan, s Nigel Balchin/Robert Musel, Certificate A)

An American agent is sent to France unaware that his mission will only succeed if he is captured and reveals what he believes to be details of the forthcoming Allied invasion.

The Clouded Yellow (1950, d Ralph Thomas, p Betty E Box, s Janet Green, Certificate U)

A former wartime Intelligence officer finds himself using his ability to evade captivity when he helps a traumatised young woman wrongly accused of murder.

Cockleshell Heroes (1954, d Jose Ferrer/Alex Bryce, p Phil C Samuel, s Bryan Forbes/Richard Maibaum, Certificate U)

Royal Marine commandoes use canoes in a daring mission to destroy ships supplying the Germans.

The Colditz Story (1955, d Guy Hamilton, p Ivan Foxwell, s Guy Hamilton/Ivan Foxwell/William Douglas Home/PR Reid, Certificate U)

Allied prisoners-of-war search for a way out of the notorious escape-proof camp housing persistent would-be escapers.

Conspiracy of Hearts (1960, d Ralph Thomas, p Betty E Box, s Robert Pressnell Jnr., Certificate U)

Italian nuns smuggling Jewish children out of an internment camp find their lives in danger when the Germans take over the camp.

Count Five and Die (1957, d Victor Vicas, p Ernest Gartside, s Jack Seddon/Richard Pursall, Certificate A)

An Allied Intelligence team seeking to fool the Germans into believing that the forthcoming invasion will take place in Holland suspects that it has been infiltrated by German agents.

The Cruel Sea (1953, d Charles Frend, p Leslie Norman, s Eric Ambler, Certificate U)
A former merchant seaman commanding Atlantic convoy escorts must transform a collection of enthusiastic volunteers into an effective team.

The Dam Busters (1955, d Michael Anderson, p Robert Clark, s RC Sherriff, Certificate U)
A scientist designs bombs to breach the great German dams and a squadron leader trains and leads a hand-picked team to deliver them.

Dancing with Crime (1947, d John Paddy Carstairs, p James Carter, s Brock Williams, Certificate A)
When a war hero's best friend is killed by members of a criminal gang he sets about the task of bringing them to justice.

Danger Within (1959, d Don Chaffey, p Colin Lesslie, s Brian Forbes/Frank Harvey, Certificate U)
British officers in an Italian prisoner-of-war camp suspect they have a traitor in their midst who must be prevented from informing the guards about a planned mass breakout.

The Deep Blue Sea (1955, d/p Anatole Litvak, s Terence Rattigan, Certificate A)
The wife of a High Court judge leaves her husband after becoming infatuated with a former RAF pilot.

Desert Mice (1959, d Michael Relph, p Basil Dearden, s David Climie, Certificate U)
One man's hopes of a quiet and uneventful war are disrupted by the arrival of ENSA performers keen to entertain the troops.

The Divided Heart (1954, d Charles Crichton, p Michael Truman/Michael Balcon, s Jack Whittingham, Certificate U)
Two women battle for the custody of a young boy taken from his mother by the Germans and adopted by a couple who believed he was an orphan.

Dunkirk (1958, d Leslie Norman, p Michael Forlong/Michael Balcon, s David Divine/WP Lipscomb, Certificate U)
A small group of British soldiers cut off from their unit must make their way to the beaches of Dunkirk.

The End of the Affair (1954, d Edward Dmytryk, p David Lewis, s Lenore Coffee, Certificate A)
A woman vows to end her affair after her lover is nearly killed during an air raid.

Eyes That Kill (1947, d/p/s Richard M Grey, Certificate A)

British Intelligence must track down fugitive Nazis who are trying to kidnap a German atomic scientist who fled to Britain.

The Flamingo Affair (1948, d/p Horace Shepherd, s Maurice Moiseiwitsch, Certificate A)

Missing the status and excitement he enjoyed during the war, a former commando officer is easy prey for a *femme fatale* who wants to use his martial skills in her black-market empire.

Foxhole in Cairo (1960, d John Moxey, p Steven Pallos/Donald Taylor, s Leonard Mosley, Certificate A)

A British Intelligence officer tracks down German agents who are operating in Cairo and then fools them into passing on fabricated information concerning Allied plans in North Africa.

Frieda (1947, d Basil Dearden, p Michael Relph/Michael Balcon, s Angus MacPhail/Ronald Millar, Certificate A)

A former RAF pilot returns to his English village along with the German nurse who helped him to escape from a prisoner-of-war camp.

The Gentle Gunman (1952, d Basil Dearden, p Michael Relph/Michael Balcon, s Roger MacDougall, Certificate A)

An IRA volunteer has doubts about the morality of armed struggle after spending time living in Blitz-torn London.

George in Civvy Street (1946, d/p Marcel Varnel, s Peter Fraser/Howard Irving Young, Certificate A)

A demobbed serviceman finds that life in peace-time Civvy Street is not exactly what he had been hoping for.

Gift Horse (1952, d Compton Bennett, p George Pitcher, s William Fairchild/Hugh Hastings/William Rose, Certificate U)

The captain of an old destroyer struggles to establish command of his ship but his determination and devotion to his crew eventually win him their respect and affection.

Hotel Sahara (1951, d Ken Annakin, p George H Brown, s Patrick Kirwan/ George H Brown, Certificate U)

The owner of a remote desert hotel tries to adjust to successive waves of invading armies.

I See a Dark Stranger (1946, d Frank Launder, p/s Frank Launder/Sidney Gilliat, Certificate A)

An Irish girl with romantic notions of fighting against Britain becomes involved with German agents and a plan to pass details of Allied invasion plans to Berlin.

I Was Monty's Double (1958, d John Guillermin, p Maxwell Setton, s Bryan Forbes, Certificate U)

A small-time actor is recruited to act as Montgomery's double in order to mislead the Germans about the intended location of the Allied invasion.

Ice Cold in Alex (1958, d J Lee Thompson, p WA Whittaker, s TJ Morrison/Christopher Landon, Certificate A)

An ambulance crew battles to survive the desert to reach the city of Alexandria and the prospect of an ice-cold beer.

Ill Met by Moonlight (1957, d/p/s Michael Powell/Emeric Pressburger, Certificate U)

A British commando unit and Cretan resistance fighters pull off an audacious plan to kidnap a German general.

The Intruder (1953, d Guy Hamilton, p Ivan Foxwell, s Robin Maugham/John Hunter/Anthony Squire, Certificate U)

A former tank commander tracks down a one-time courageous trooper who has now turned to crime.

The Key (1958, d Carol Reed, p/s Carl Foreman, Certificate A)

A succession of captains of ill-fated salvage tug boats inherit a key to a flat and with it the beautiful and mysterious Stella.

Landfall (1949, d Ken Annakin, p Victor Skutezky, s Talbot Jennings/Gilbert Gunn/Anne Burnaby, Certificate U)

A pilot's apparent error of judgement appears to have ended his flying career but his girlfriend believes she has uncovered evidence to establish his innocence.

The League of Gentlemen (1960, d Basil Dearden, p Michael Relph, s Bryan Forbes, Certificate A)

An embittered former colonel assembles a team of cashiered officers to carry out a bank robbery that is planned and executed like a military operation.

Light Up the Sky (1960, d/p Lewis Gilbert, s Vernon Harris, Certificate A)

The crew of a searchlight battery endures hours of boredom that are occasionally interrupted by night-time raids.

Lilli Marlene (1950, d Arthur Crabtree, p William Gell, s Leslie Wood, Certificate U)

The eponymous heroine of the famous song is a young girl sought by the Germans for use in propaganda broadcasts.

Lisbon Story (1946, d Paul L Stein, p Louis H Jackson, s Jack Whittingham, Certificate A)

A British Intelligence officer must ensure that a fugitive German atomic scientist does not fall into the hands of the Gestapo.

The Long and the Short and the Tall (1961, d Leslie Norman, p Michael Balcon, s Wolf Mankowitz/Frederick Gotfurt/TJ Morrison, Certificate X)

A British patrol testing sonic warfare equipment in the Burmese jungle is divided over the treatment of a Japanese prisoner.

The Lost People (1949, d Bernard Knowles, p Gordon Wellesley, s Bridget Boland/Muriel Box, Certificate A)

A British officer and his sergeant try to keep the peace in a theatre that is being used to house various groups of displaced persons at the end of the war.

Malta Story (1953, d Brian Desmond Hurst, p Peter de Sarigny, s William Fairchild/Nigel Balchin, Certificate U)

A reconnaissance pilot stranded on Malta is co-opted to help ensure the survival of the besieged island.

Man on the Run (1949, d/p/s Lawrence Huntington, Certificate A)

A deserter is wrongly suspected of the death of the owner of a jewellery shop and his only chance of clearing his name lies in bringing the real criminals to justice.

The Man Who Never Was (1956, d Ronald Neame, p Andre Hakim, s Nigel Balchin, Certificate U)

A plan is devised whereby a corpse carrying forged papers is washed up on the Spanish coast to persuade the Germans that the Allies are not going to invade through Sicily.

Mine Own Executioner (1947, d Anthony Kimmins, p Anthony Kimmins/Jack Kitchin, s Nigel Balchin, Certificate A)

A psychologist tries to help a young pilot who is exhibiting signs of war neurosis after having been imprisoned and tortured by the Japanese.

Night Beat (1948, d/p Harold Huth, s TJ Morrison/Guy Morgan/Roland Pertwee, Certificate A)

Two returning commandoes join the Police force where one prospers but the other is corrupted by a criminal gang.

Night Boat to Dublin (1946, d Lawrence Huntington, p Hamilton G Inglis, s Lawrence Huntington/Robert Hall, Certificate A)

A British Intelligence officer must discover the whereabouts of an atomic scientist who has fled from Germany but is now being held by German agents.

The Night We Dropped a Clanger (1959, d Darcy Conyers, p David Henley, s John Chapman, Certificate U)

A too-good-to-be-true RAF officer enlists the help of a double in order to uncover the secret of Germany's latest weapon.

Noose (1948, d Edmond T Greville, p Edward Dryhurst, s Richard Llewellyn, Certificate A)

A former commando officer and his fiancée set about bringing to justice the notorious head of a crime syndicate.

No Time to Die/Tank Force (1958, d Terence Young, p Phil C Samuel, s Richard Maibaum/ Terence Young, Certificate U)

Allied prisoners-of-war, including an American who is wanted by the Gestapo, break out of a make-shift prison camp in the desert.

Now It Can Be Told/School for Danger (1946, d/s Teddy Baird, p Royal Air Force Film Production Unit, Certificate U)

A documentary account of the training and undercover work carried out by the Special Operations Executive in France.

Odette (1950, d/p Herbert Wilcox, s Warren Chetham-Strode, Certificate A)

A woman volunteers for the Special Operations Executive and carries out missions behind enemy lines in France.

On the Fiddle (1961, d Cyril Frankel, p S Benjamin Fisz, s Harold Buchman, Certificate A)

A likeable spiv finds himself "volunteering" for wartime service in the RAF.

The One That Got Away (1957, d Roy Ward Baker, p Julian Wintle, s Howard Clewes, Certificate U)

A captured German fighter pilot becomes the only prisoner-of-war to escape from the Allies and return to Germany.

Operation Amsterdam (1959, d Michael McCarthy, p Maurice Cowan, s Michael McCarthy/John Eldridge, Certificate U)

British Intelligence and members of the Dutch Resistance try to prevent industrial diamonds falling into the hands of the Germans.

Operation Bullshine (1959, d Gilbert Gunn, p Frank Godwin, s Anne Burnaby/Rupert Lang/ Gilbert Gunn, Certificate U)

Male soldiers at an anti-aircraft battery are distracted by the arrival of female troops.

Orders to Kill (1958, d Anthony Asquith, p Anthony Havelock-Allan, s Paul Dehn/George St George, Certificate A)

A former American pilot is ordered to kill a suspected traitor but has a crisis of conscience when he concludes that the man is innocent.

The Overlanders (1946, d/s Harry Watt, p Ralph Smart/Michael Balcon, Certificate U)

Australian cattle herders try to reduce the likelihood of a Japanese invasion by moving vast numbers of cattle inland.

The Password is Courage (1961, d/s Andrew L Stone, p Andrew L Stone/Virginia Stone, Certificate U)

A British prisoner-of-war refuses to let captivity prevent him undermining the German war effort.

Piccadilly Incident (1946, d/p Herbert Wilcox, s Nicholas Phipps, Certificate A)

A British officer remarries after hearing that his wife was drowned at sea, but his world is briefly thrown into confusion when he learns that she survived the attack that sunk her ship.

Portrait from Life (d Terence Fisher, p Anthony Darnborough, s Frank Harvey Jnr/ Muriel Box/ Sidney Box, Certificate A)

A British officer searches the displaced persons' camps of post-war Europe looking for a young German woman who he has seen in a portrait in London.

Private Angelo (1949, d/p/s Peter Ustinov/Michael Anderson, Certificate A)

A reluctant Italian soldier who has promised his girlfriend to avoid heroism at all costs is disappointed to learn that the Italian surrender does not mean the end of his war.

Private's Progress (1956, d John Boulting, p Roy Boulting, s Frank Harvey/John Boulting, Certificate U)

An Army volunteer discovers that not everyone shares his ideals of selfless service.

The Purple Plain (1954, d Robert Parrish, p John Bryan, s Eric Ambler, Certificate A)

A pilot traumatised by his wife's death finds that the love of a Burmese woman gives him the will to survive when his plane crashes in Japanese-held territory.

Reach for the Sky (1956, d Lewis Gilbert, p Daniel M Angel, s Lewis Gilbert/Vernon Harris, Certificate U)

The story of how Douglas Bader overcame the loss of his legs in a flying accident to become one of the heroes of the Battle of Britain.

The Red Beret (1953, d Terence Young, p Irving Allen/Albert R Broccoli, s Richard Maibaum/Frank Nugent, Certificate U)

A "Canadian" volunteer for the newly-formed Parachute Regiment tries to hide his past as a US pilot.

The Safecracker (1957, d Ray Milland, p David E Rose/John R Sloane, s Paul Monash, Certificate U) A security technician tempted into crime is offered a chance of redemption when he is recruited to join a commando mission behind enemy lines.

School for Secrets (1946, d/sstee Peter Ustinov, p George H Brown/ Peter Ustinov, Certificate U)

Scientists must overcome personal differences and professional rivalries if they are to contribute to the further development of radar.

Sea of Sand (1958, d Guy Green, p Robert S Baker/Monty Berman, s Robert Westerby, Certificate U)

A unit of the Long-Distance Desert Group succeeds in destroying a German fuel dump but find that the journey back to base is the hardest part.

The Sea Shall Not Have Them (1954, d Lewis Gilbert, p Daniel M Angel, s Lewis Gilbert/Vernon Harris, Certificate U)

A search-and-rescue team scours the seas for survivors of a plane crash.

Sea Wife (1957, d Bob McNaught, p Andre Hakim, s George K Burke, Certificate A)

A survivor of a sunken ship falls for one of his fellow survivors unaware that she is a nun.

Seven Thunders (1957, d Hugo Fregonese, p Daniel M Angel, s John Baines, Certificate U)

Two British prisoners-of-war take refuge in the no-go district of Marseilles but when the Germans begin clearing the area they risk falling into the hands of a psychotic killer.

The Ship That Died of Shame (1955, d Basil Dearden, p Michael Relph/Michael Balcon, s John Whiting/Michael Relph /Basil Dearden, Certificate A)

A motor gunboat is restored by its former crew for smuggling wine and brandy but the ship is soon being used in serious crime.

Silent Dust (1949, d Lance Comfort, p NA Bronsten, s Michael Pertwee)

A father's plans to pay tribute to the heroism of his son, believed to have been killed in action, are disrupted by his reappearance.

The Silent Enemy (1958, d/s William Fairchild, p Bertram Ostrer, Certificate U)

British divers battle with their Italian counterparts to protect Allied shipping from limpet mines.

Single-Handed/Sailor of the King (1953, d Roy Boulting, p Frank McCarthy, s Valentine Davies, Certificate U)

Following the sinking of his ship, a naval marksman manages to slow down repairs to the German ship responsible for its sinking.

Sink the Bismarck! (1960, d Lewis Gilbert, p John Brabourne, s Edmund H North, Certificate U)

The Director of Operations in the Admiralty War Room must carry out Churchill's order to do whatever it takes to sink Germany's most feared battleship.

The Small Back Room (1949, d/p/s Michael Powell/Emeric Pressburger, Certificate A)

A disabled scientist must overcome his addiction to drink if he is to discover the secret of a new German mine that is killing civilians.

The Small Voice (1948, d Fergus McDonell, p Anthony Havelock-Allan, s Derek Neame/Julian Orde/George Barraud, Certificate A)

A man disabled in the war must overcome his sense of inferiority if he is to protect his wife and save the lives of two young children when they are held hostage by criminals.

The Square Peg (1958, d John Paddy Carstairs, p Hugh Stewart, s Jack Davies/Henry E Blyth/Norman Wisdom/Eddie Leslie, Certificate U)

A road-mender conscripted into the Pioneer Corps is mistakenly parachuted into France where he rescues a British agent.

The Steel Bayonet (1957, d/p Michael Carreras, s Howard Clewes, Certificate A)

A British Army unit in North Africa is denied their much-anticipated leave and ordered to make one last stand.

They Made Me a Fugitive (1947, d Alberto Cavalcanti, p NA Bronsten, s Noel Langley, Certificate A)

A former pilot joins an underworld gang because he misses the excitement of battle but his moral principles upset the gang's leader.

They Were Not Divided (1950, d/s Terence Young, p Herbert Smith, Certificate A)

An Englishman and an American join up together, become firm friends, fight alongside each other together and finally die together.

They Who Dare (1953, d Lewis Milestone, p Aubrey Baring/Maxwell Setton, s Robert Westerby, Certificate U)

British commandoes of the embryonic Special Air Services lead local Resistance fighters in an attack on German airfields on the island of Rhodes.

Those People Next Door (1953, d John Harlow, p Tom Blakeley, s Zelda Davees, Certificate U)

Tensions between two neighbouring households in London are heightened by rationing and the stresses of the Blitz.

Tiger in the Smoke (1956, d Roy Baker, p Leslie Parkyn, s Anthony Pelissier, Certificate A)

A commando mission is restaged after a psychotic killer escapes from custody and re-enters the lives of two of his former comrades.

A Town like Alice (1956, d Jack Lee, p Joseph Janni, s WP Lipscomb/Richard Mason, Certificate A)

Following the surrender of Singapore, a young Englishwoman finds herself with a gradually diminishing group of women and children seeking shelter in Japanese-occupied Malaya.

The Traitor (1957, d/s Michael McCarthy, p EJ Fancey, Certificate A)

A former British agent hosts a gathering of members of a resistance unit at his country house in order to discover who betrayed their leader to the Germans.

The Two-Headed Spy (1958, d Andre de Toth, p Hal E Chester/Bill Kirby, s James O'Donnell, Certificate U)

An interest in antique clocks provides the cover for the rising star of Hitler's General Staff to pass details of German plans to the Allies.

Very Important Person (1961, d Ken Annakin, p Julian Wintle/Leslie Parkyn, s Jack Davies/Henry Blyth, Certificate U)

When a top British scientist finds himself in a German prisoner-of-war camp, news is received from London that he must be helped to escape immediately.

The Wind Cannot Read (1958, Ralph Thomas, Betty E Box, Richard Mason, Certificate U)

A British officer falls in love with his Japanese language teacher and must escape from captivity in Burma when he discovers that she is terminally ill.

The Woman with No Name (1950, d Ladislav Vajda/George More O'Ferrall, p John Stafford, s Guy Morgan/ Ladislav Vajda, Certificate A)

A woman survives the bombing of her hotel only to find that she has no memory of her past other than two recurring nightmares.

The Wooden Horse (1950, d Jack Lee/ Ian Dalrymple, p Ian Dalrymple, s Eric Williams, Certificate U)

British prisoners-of-war construct a vaulting horse that can be used to cover the entrance of a tunnel placed close to the perimeter fence.

The Years Between (1946, d Compton Bennett, p Sydney Box, s Muriel Box/ Sydney Box, Certificate A)

A woman rebuilds her life after hearing that her husband has been killed in action and when he returns she fears they cannot bridge the divide caused by years of separation.

Yesterday's Enemy (1959, d Val Guest, p Michael Carreras, s Peter R Newman, Certificate A)

A British officer who has ordered two Burmese villagers to be shot to persuade an interpreter to divulge information about Japanese plans to invade India later finds the tables turned.

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