

THE SCREEN'S THREATENING SKIES:
AERIAL WARFARE AND BRITISH CINEMA, 1927-1939

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By

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation supplements previously conducted research on aviation in interwar Britain by providing a necessary examination of the appearance of aerial warfare on British cinema screens between 1927 and 1939. It examines the presentation of the First World War, military aviators, the Royal Air Force, bombing, and aerial warfare to the British public. More specifically, it examines the connections between flying, aerial warfare, cinema, and the popular imagination in interwar Great Britain. It uses feature films, specifically *Hell's Angels*, *The Dawn Patrol*, *Things to Come*, documentaries like *RAF*, *The Gap*, and *The Warning*, and newsreels. In addition to examining cinematic sources, it also extensively utilizes film press books, scripts, programmes, and British Government documents to determine the motives for producing these pictures, what influenced their writing, how they were promoted to the British public, and how cinema reviewers responded to them. It reveals that the cinema helped shape British perceptions of aerial warfare (and the First World War) during the interwar period, providing insight into how the British state and military interacted with the nation's mass media complex. In doing so, it highlights the important, and often underappreciated, symbiotic relationship between mass culture and government policy.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Anti-aircraft Guns
AAF	Auxiliary Air Force
ACC	Air Cadet Corps
ARP	Air Raid Precautions
BBFC	British Board of Film Censors
BFI	British Film Institute, London
BUF	British Union of Fascists
EKCO	Eric Kirkham Cole Limited, Radio Manufacturer
GPO	General Post Office, Film Unit
HO	Home Office
INF	Ministry of Information
ITN	Independent Television News
ITV	Independent Television
IWM	The Imperial War Museum, London
KCL LHC	Basil Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College, London
LCC	London County Council
MGM	Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
MI3	Directorate of Military Intelligence, Europe
MO	Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex
POST	Royal Mail Archive, London

RAF	Royal Air Force
RAFVR	Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve
RFC	Royal Flying Corps
RKO	Radio-Keith-Orpheum Pictures
TA	The Territorial Army
TNA	The National Archives, London
TWA	Transcontinental & Western Air
WO	War Office

Introduction

On the night of November 14, 1940, approximately 500 Luftwaffe bombers appeared over Coventry in the West Midlands. During the night-long raid, the bombers razed the industrial city on an unprecedented scale. The Territorial Army's anti-aircraft batteries and the Royal Air Force (RAF), despite their best efforts, failed to repel the German attack. As the bombers attacked, members of the fire brigade battled infernos the size of city blocks, while Air Raid Precautions (ARP) officers and the police warned of danger, pulled victims from debris, kept up communications and infrastructure, and tried to maintain order. Meanwhile, civilians fled to underground shelters or prepared their homes for high explosives and incendiary bombs. By the time the last German bombers left British air space Coventry's cathedral was a smouldering ruin, the city centre was mostly rubble, its industrial sectors were laid to waste, over 4,000 homes were destroyed, and nearly 600 people were dead, with another 1,000 or more injured. Despite the devastation, the people of Coventry endured and went about their business as best they could, as would the people of London, Hamburg, Cologne, Dresden, and Tokyo later in the war.

Since the end of the Second World War, the Blitz has become part of British popular lore: as the story goes, Britons sipped pints of bitter while their cities crumbled around them; they endured the Blitz only to return the favour to Germany and win the war. Only recently have scholars started to look at the country's pre-war cultural and social preparations for an aerial attack and tried to explain why Britain responded to

aerial bombardment in 1940 and 1941 the way it did. Susan R. Grayzel argues that Britons had been familiarized with aerial warfare well before the Blitz during the First World War. She contends that the experience of the First World War created a hardened “civilian identity” which was maintained during the interwar years and “resurrected” during the Second World War.¹ However, as of yet, little attention has been paid to how the silver screen presaged Germany’s attacks on Britain during the first half of the Second World War. Indeed, the attacks on Britain during the Great War were minimal and a mere sliver of London’s population would have experienced them. Still, by 1939 many people in Coventry would have already viewed scenes of aerial destruction in cinematic form. Though it is impossible to quantify, any given citizen of Coventry – indeed, any given Briton – would almost certainly have encountered one of the films or newsreels explored in this dissertation, at least indirectly, given their pervasiveness and the extraordinary extent of cinema attendance during the 1930s.

This dissertation will try to explore how aerial warfare and military aviators were portrayed in film in Britain between 1927 and 1939. Nineteen twenty-seven has been chosen as the starting point for this study because it coincides with the emergence of talking pictures and permits a more encompassing analysis of increasingly intense war fears after 1933, political extremism, social and political crises, and to a lesser extent the Great Depression. It will contend that certain homogenized images of aerial warfare dominated British cinemas. Films depicted the fit, elite, and masculine aviator as someone who was as skilled with a yoke as he was with a pint; they portrayed the technologically advanced and resolute RAF as prepared to meet any threats to Britain’s

¹ Susan R. Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire: Air Raids and Culture in Britain from the Great War to the Blitz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3, 6, 318, 321.

sovereignty. On a bleaker note, the screen made the bomber appear to be a very real threat to not only Britain, but also Western civilization. On the other hand, it also showed that the British people's unified resolve and spirit of service would defeat any potential adversary.

The dissertation is divided into seven chapters. Chapter one explores the historiography of interwar British cinema, aviation, and the Royal Air Force and describes how my dissertation engages with the broad scholarship on each of these subjects. It also notes the films on which the most substantive analysis is focused: *Hell's Angels*, *The Dawn Patrol*, *RAF*, *Things to Come*, *The Gap*, and *The Warning*.² I have not delved extensively into theoretical or cinematographic analyses of the films under consideration. Rather, I have illuminated how each of these films depicts aerial warfare and how those depictions were generally accepted by the British press. Finally, chapter one briefly outlines the online and archival primary sources utilized, from mostly untouched newsreel databases to equally understudied archival sources at the British Film Institute, the National Archives (London), and the Mass Observation Archive.

Chapter two serves two functions: one, it will explore the nuances of British air-mindedness (a term widely used in the 1930s to describe an interest in, and a knowledge of, aviation); two, it will examine the place of the cinema in interwar British culture. The first section of the chapter will demonstrate the considerable British interest in flight during the 1930s, from the general public to the government. Specifically, it will show that people not only voraciously consumed aeronautical events and art forms, but

² *Hell's Angels*, directed by Howard Hughes (Los Angeles: Caddo Company, 1930), *The Dawn Patrol*, directed by Edmund Goulding (Los Angeles: Warner Bros., 1938), *Things to Come*, directed by William Cameron Menzies (London: London Films, 1936), *RAF*, directed by John Betts (London: Gaumont British, 1935), *The Gap* (London: Gaumont British, 1937), and *The Warning*, (London: British National, 1939).

that those spectacles helped shape opinions about aviation. The concern that the bomber would “always get through,” and thereby end Britain’s immunity from attack, overrode British airmindedness.³ The cinema, like aviation, was tremendously popular in Britain during the 1930s. It was the single most popular medium in the country, especially amongst young people. Not only was it consumed in tremendous quantities, but scholars have also proven that it could shape viewers’ opinions. This argument extends beyond feature films to newsreels, which were becoming increasingly important news sources for a large percentage of the British public. Between these two sections, this chapter will show that the cinema was really the only way for most Britons to access aviation during the 1930s.

Chapter three is the first of five primarily argumentative chapters. It will discuss how Royal Flying Corps (RFC) aviators appeared on British cinema screens during the 1930s. By focusing on two films: *Hell’s Angels* and *The Dawn Patrol*, it will establish how contemporary stereotypes of the First World War aviator – the drunken, playful, but dutiful flyer-hero – were firmly entrenched by interwar cinema. In doing so, it will show how Hollywood was fundamental in shaping how Britons saw their First World War pilots. More specifically, it will explore the portrayal of camaraderie, masculinity, disillusionment, and alcohol consumption. Furthermore, it will argue that Hollywood films sensationalized the airplane’s destructiveness. Critically, both of these images: the partying flyer-hero and the extremely destructive airplane, were largely accepted by the British press as realistic depictions of the First World War in the air.

³ Referring to Stanley Baldwin’s remark: “the bomber will always get through.” House of Commons Debates, November 10, 1932.

Chapter four explores cinematic portrayals of the RAF during the 1930s and the role the British government played in shaping them. It begins with a treatment of the RAF and Air Ministry's attempts to shape their own public image using the cinema. The service tried to tackle two important public relations issues: one, the idea that its pilots were reckless hell-raisers; and two, that Britain was highly vulnerable to devastating aerial attack. The use of the cinema, particularly newsreels, highlights the importance that the British government placed on mass media as a way to influence the civilian population. In a related manner, newsreels form the backbone of this chapter's argument. It is through these brief pre-feature presentations that the RAF and the Air Ministry were able to reach millions of British cinemagoers and try to shape their ideas about aviation and aerial warfare. Ultimately, the chapter will show that the RAF was successful in presenting the image it wanted to the British public through newsreels, the 1935 film *RAF*, and George Formby's *It's in the Air* (1938).⁴

Chapter five focuses squarely on the most expensive and important British film production of the 1930s: *Things to Come*. Based on H. G. Wells's *The Shape of Things to Come*, it forecasts the destruction of civilization, Britain toiling under a post-apocalyptic dictator, and finally its salvation at the hands of technocratic foreigners.⁵ What is fundamentally important, and has never been directly explored by historians or experts on Wells, is that the airplane and aerial warfare were the picture's central themes: the airplane destroys civilization, it becomes the benchmark of progress in the ruins, and it is aviators who ultimately restore order and return humanity to a teleological course. It is also important to note the striking similarities between the depiction of air raids in the

⁴ *It's in the Air*, directed by Anthony Kimmins (London: Associated Talking Pictures, 1938).

⁵ H. G. Wells, *The Shape of Things to Come* (London: MacMillan, 1933).

fictional *Things to Come* and the government-sponsored films *The Gap* and *The Warning*. In each case, the destructive power of the airplane is grossly exaggerated.

Chapters six and seven return to the methodology applied in chapter four. They directly explore the British government's attempts to cultivate its public image pertaining to aerial warfare and air defence. Particularly, they will demonstrate that government-inspired or government-produced newsreels and films presented aerial warfare, sometimes deliberately, to the British public in the same exaggerated way as film studios did. However, chapters six and seven also highlight subtle changes that were made in the presentation of aerial warfare to the British public. These were directly tied to changes in RAF policy regarding air defence, as well as to the increased likelihood of war after Nazi Germany became more expansionist in 1938.

Historiography and Primary Sources

Existing Literature: Interwar British Cinema

Dozens of historians and film scholars have explored nearly every facet of interwar British cinema, covering themes from the level of popular interest, viewing patterns of different classes, genders, and regions, the use of film as a propaganda tool, the popularity of American pictures, popular genres, government regulations, and cinema design and construction. Cinema's tremendous importance to popular life in Great Britain during the 1930s will be explored in the next chapter; but for now, it was one of the most important media. Jeffrey Richards and Rachael Low are the most important scholars of interwar cinema, both having extensively published on interwar British cinema.¹ Some of their work signals the common frustration in studying interwar British

¹ Jeffrey Richards, *The Unknown 1930s: An Alternative History of the British Cinema, 1929-1939* (London: IB Tauris, 2001), Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1930-1939* (London: Routledge, 1984), Jeffrey Richards and Anthony Aldgate, *Best of British: Cinema and Society, 1930-1970* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), Jeffrey Richards, *Film and British Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan, *Mass Observation at the Movies* (London: Routledge, 1987), Jeffrey Richards, "The British Board of Film Censors and Central Control in the 1930s: Images of Britain," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 1 no. 2 (1981): 95-116, Jeffrey Richards, "Cinemagoing in Worktown: Regional Film Audiences in 1930s Britain," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 14 no. 2 (1994): 147-166, "Controlling the Screen: The British Cinema in the 1930s," *History Today* 33 (March 1983): 11-17, Rachael Low, *Films of Comment and Persuasion of the 1930s* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979), Rachael Low, *Documentary and Education Films of the 1930s* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979), Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film*, Volume 4, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979), Rachael Low, *Film Making in 1930s Britain* (London: Unwin, 1985), Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It: The British Cinema and the Second World War* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), Roy Armes, *A Critical History of British Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson eds., *British Cinema: Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 2000), Charles Barr, *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1984), H. E. Browning and A. A. Sorrell, "Cinema and Cinemagoing in Great Britain," *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 117 (1954): 133-170, Margaret Dickinson and Sarah Street, *Cinema and the State: The Film Industry and British Government, 1927-1984* (London: BFI, 1984), Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), Lee

cinema, indeed the cinema at all: trying to assess how audiences reacted to a film. Richards offers some solutions to this problem, which I have tried to apply as much as possible. He points to the importance of newspaper and trade reviews of films. To do this I have made extensive use of the *Monthly Film Bulletin* (published by the British Film Institute), *The Bioscope*, and other trade publications. These publications were written for, and read by, cinema proprietors, offering them news on technical, regulatory, commercial, and genre changes.² More importantly, they provided detailed synopses and evaluations of films. These were entirely focused on advising cinema owners as to the potential popularity and profitability of a film, measured by categories such as story, stars, production values, acting, and general points of appeal. They would specifically note what classes and genders films might have appealed to. The recommendations made by these publications can act as an effective window into the taste of British cinemagoers. Fortunately, this was not a concern in writing chapter seven, as the British government took definite steps to assess the popular response to the 1939 air defence film *The Warning*.

Grierson and Colin McCabe, *Empire and Film* (London: Palgrave, 2011), Mark H. Glancy, *When Hollywood Loved Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), Marcia Landy, *British Genres: Cinema and Society, 1930-1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), J. P. Mayer, *British Cinemas and Their Audiences* (London, 1946), J. P. Mayer, *The Sociology of Film* (London: 1946), Peter Miles and Malcolm Smith, *Cinema, Literature, and Society* (London: Routledge, 1987), Robert Murphy, *The British Cinema Book* (London: BFI, 1997), George Perry, *The Great British Picture Show: From the 90s to the 70s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), Nicholas Pronay, *Propaganda, Politics and Film, 1918-1945* (London: MacMillan, 1982), Murray Pomerance, ed., *Cinema and Modernity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), R. Samuel, *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity* (London: Routledge, 1989), James Robertson, *The Hidden Cinema: British Film Censorship in Action* (London: Routledge, 1989), John Sedgwick, *Popular Film Going in 1930s Britain: A Choice of Pleasures* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2000), Stephen Shafer, *British Popular Films, 1929-1939: The Cinema of Reassurance* (London: Routledge, 1997), Andrew Spicer, *Typical Men: The Representations of Masculinity in Popular British Cinema* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003), Sarah Street, *British National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1997), and David Williams, *Media, Memory and the First World War* (Montreal: McGill-Queens, 2009).

² Richards, *Age of the Dream Palace*.

Aviation Historiography

Since the mid-1980s historians have adopted a more elaborate approaches to aviation history by focusing on cultural examinations, rather than narrative ones. Among the important early works in this sub-field was *The Winged Gospel: America's Romance with Aviation, 1900-1950*, in which Joseph Corn traces the enthusiasm of Americans for controlled flight during the first half of the twentieth century. He contends that to discuss only the practical impact of a technology, or to trace its development, is too simplistic. Instead, he argues studying the relationship between flying and society can be used to illustrate social and cultural mores, particularly relating to technology, transport, class, gender, and warfare. Furthermore, Corn's argument on the uniquely American reaction to the airplane, or in his words the "winged gospel," opened the possibility to varied national responses to aviation. A number of historians such as A. Bowdoin van Riper, Dominick Pisano, and Robert Wohl have continued to study American aviation using Corn's thesis.³ Perhaps for this study the most important is the second of Wohl's two monographs covering the place of aviation in the Western imagination: *The Spectacle of Flight*. Wohl clearly establishes an important symbiotic relationship between culture and aviation, and the prominent place aviation had in the minds of Westerners in the 1920s and 1930s. Other historians in the 1990s would use Corn's book as a model to study Germany, Canada, the United States, the Soviet Union, and Italy. No matter which Western nation, the airplane and aviator were seen as fundamental components of

³ Joseph Corn, *The Winged Gospel: America's Romance with Aviation, 1900-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), Dominick Pisano, ed., *The Airplane in American Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), A. Bowdoin van Riper, *Imagining Flight: Aviation and Popular Culture* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2004), Robert Wohl, *A Passion For Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination, 1908-1918* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), and Robert Wohl, *The Spectacle of Flight: Aviation and the Western Imagination, 1920-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 3.

progress, modernity, and the modern aesthetic.⁴ Each historian was able to confirm Corn's thesis that cultural and social responses to the airplane were national, while adhering to certain broader international trends.

Despite the body of work on aviation during the interwar years in other countries there remains a lack of published scholarship exclusively examining Great Britain. The closest book-length study on aviation in British culture during the interwar years is David Edgerton's *England and the Aeroplane: An Essay on a Militant and Technological Nation* (1991).⁵ In this short book, Edgerton tackles a commonly held belief that Britain was a state with limited interest in technology and modernity, in this case the aeroplane. Instead, he argues that the airplane had a "vital place" in British industry, defence planning, and culture. Despite his highly detailed and informative discussion of Britain's relationship with the airplane, there is limited direct discussion of the airplane's place in British culture.

Other article and chapter-length discussions have also appeared, especially the last ten years. Each has tried to link aviation to wider social, political, and cultural trends in Great Britain. Writers such as Martin Caedel, Laurence Goldstein, Susan R. Grayzel, Brett Holman, Liz Millward, Martin Pugh, Bernhard Rieger, Priya Satia, and Patrick Zander have explored varying elements of the interplay between aviation and culture in

⁴ Guillaume De Syon, *Zeppelin!: Germany and the Airship, 1900-1939* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), Peter Fritzsche, *A Nation of Fliers: German Aviation and the Popular Imagination*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), Fred Erisman, *From Birdwomen to Skygirls* (Fort Worth: TCU Press, 2009), John McCannon, *Red Arctic: Polar Exploration and the Myth of the North in the Soviet Union, 1932-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), Richard Overy, "Heralds of Modernity," *Fin de Siècle and its Legacy*, ed. Mikalus Teich & Roy Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Scott Palmer, *Dictatorship of the Air: Aviation Culture and the Fate of Modern Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Claudio Segré, *Italo Balbo: A Fascist Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), and Jonathan Vance, *High Flight: Aviation and the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Penguin, 2002).

⁵ David Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane: An Essay on a Militant and Technological Nation* (London: MacMillan, 1991).

Britain and the British Empire.⁶ They have used the airplane as a prism to analyze and explore British manifestations of bombing, warfare, internationalism, world government, civil defence, modernity, political extremism, the Empire, and gender. Beyond the interwar years, Martin Francis's 2009 book *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force, 1939-1945*, provides an innovative cultural study of the place of the RAF pilot in British culture during the Second World War, applying innovative themes of analysis such as love, danger, fear, and family. Finally, two books by Gordon Pirie have departed from the typical narrative of British imperial aviation and have cut somewhat deeper into the social, cultural, and political importance that aviation had to the declining Empire.⁷

While there is only a growing library of work of cultural discussions of British aviation during the interwar period, there is no shortage of books that provide narrative histories of British aviation between the wars. These works lay the groundwork for future study. The most comprehensive consideration of British aviation during the

⁶ Martin Caedel, "Popular Fiction and the Next War, 1918-1939" in *Class, Culture, and Social Change: A New View of the 1930s*, ed. Frank Gloversmith (London: Harvester Press, 1980), Colin Cook, "A Fascist Memory: Oswald Mosley and the Myth of the Airman," *European Review of History* 4 no. 2: 147-162, Laurence Goldstein, *The Flying Machine and Modern Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire*, Brett Holman, "The Air Panic of 1935: British Press Opinion Between Disarmament and Rearmament," *Journal of Contemporary History* 46 no. 2: 288-307, Liz Millward, *Women in British Imperial Air Space, 1922-1937* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's, 2008), Liz Millward, "The Embodied Aerial Subject: Gendered mobility in British interwar Air Tours," *Journal of Transport History* 29.1 (2008): 5-22, Martin Pugh, *We Danced All Night: A Social History of Britain Between the Wars* (London: The Bodley Head, 2005), Bernhard Rieger, "Fast Couples: Gender and Modernity in Britain and Germany in the 1930s," *Historical Research* 76 (2003): 364-388, Priya Satia, "The Defence of Inhumanity: Air Control and the British Idea of Arabia," *American Historical Review* 111 no. 1 (2006): 16-51, Gore Vidal, "On Flying," in *Armageddon? Essays 1983-1987* (London: A. Deutsch, 1987), and Patrick Zander, "(Right) Wings over Everest: High Adventure, High Technology and High Nationalism on the Roof of the World, 1932-1934," *Twentieth Century British History* 21 no 3, 2010: 300-329.

⁷ Martin Francis, *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force, 1939-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), Gordon Pirie, *Air Empire: British Imperial Aviation, 1919-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), Gordon Pirie, *Cultures and Caricatures of British Imperial Aviation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

interwar years is Harald Penrose's three volumes.⁸ These three books provide an almost daily account of aerial events in the United Kingdom: air races, first flights, aircraft development and manufacturing, new air routes, famous pilots, air ministry decisions, and so on. However, his books are symptomatic of a body of scholarship that takes British interest in, and opinions about, the airplane for granted, spending little or no time trying to explore the antecedents of those opinions. They read more like almanacs or chronologies of British flying in the 1920s and 1930s and act as an excellent foundation from which to build more nuanced approaches to the subject.⁹

Historians have also extensively studied the Air Ministry and the RAF. Some of the best examples of work done on the RAF are from notable historians such as Richard Overy and Brian Bond.¹⁰ This body of literature has tackled almost every imaginable element of the Air Ministry, the RAF, and British military aviation during the interwar period: the formation of British aviation doctrine and policy, development of RAF aircraft, the use of the RAF in the Empire, the development of Britain's strategic bomber force, the growth of the force after 1936, and the development of the country's air

⁸ Harald Penrose, *British Aviation: The Adventuring Years* (London: Putnam, 1973), Harald Penrose, *British Aviation: Widening Horizons* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1979), and Harald Penrose, *British Aviation: The Ominous Skies* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1980).

⁹ Peter Fearon, "The Growth of Aviation in Britain," *Journal of Contemporary History* 20 (1999): 21-40, Robin Higham, *Britain's Imperial Air Routes 1918-1939* (London: G. T. Foulis, 1960), Graham Smith, *Taking to the Skies: The Story of British Aviation, 1903-1939* (New York: Countryside Books, 2003.)

¹⁰ Max Arthur, *There Shall Be Wings: The RAF from 1918 to the Present* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993), Brian Bond, *British Military Policy between the Two World Wars* (London: Clarendon, 1980), Walter Boyne, *The Influence of Air Power upon History* (New York: Pelican Publishing, 2003), John Ferris, "Fighter Defence before Fighter Command: The Rise of Strategic Air Defence in Great Britain, 1917-1934," *Journal of Military History* 63 (1999): 845-884, John James, *The Paladins: A Social History of the RAF up to the Outbreak of World War II* (London: MacDonald, 1990), David MacIsaac, "Voices from the Central Blue," in *Makers of Modern Strategy*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), Tony Mansell, "Flying Start: Educational and Social Factors in the Recruitment of Pilots of the Royal Air Force in the Interwar Years," *History of Education* 26 (1997): 71-90, David Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control: The Royal Air Force, 1919-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), Barry Powers, *Strategy Without Slide-Rule: British Air Strategy, 1914-1939* (London: Croom Helm, 1976), Malcolm Smith, *British Air Strategy between the Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), Malcolm Smith, "A Matter of Faith: British Strategic Air Doctrine between the Wars," *Journal of Transport History* 25 (2004): 63-83.

defences. There is still no cultural history of the RAF, though John James's *The Paladins* comes close. More important to this dissertation, beyond K. R. M. Short's book (which will be discussed shortly), there is little mention of the RAF and how it appeared on British cinema screens, or for that matter, in the British public sphere. In fact, there has been no work whatsoever done on the RAF in British newsreels.

Aerial bombardment has received considerable attention from scholars.¹¹ In the last twenty-five years scholars have turned away from narratives of bombing campaigns and focused on the cultural and social effects of bombardment, civilian reaction, and cultural manifestations of it.¹² In the British context, the Blitz has generated a large amount of scholarship, since it has become one of the enduring symbols of the Second

¹¹ Uri Bialer, *The Shadow of the Bomber: The Fear of Air Attack and British Politics* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1980), Tami Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare: The Evolution of British and American Ideas about Strategic Bombing, 1914-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), Alfred Gollin, *The Impact of Air Power on the British People and their Government* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), Brett Holman, "World Police for World Peace: British Internationalism and the Threat of a Knock-out Blow from the Air, 1919-1945," *War in History* 17 no. 3 (July 2010): 313-332, Brett Holman, *The Next War in the Air: Civilian Fears of Aerial Bombardment*, PhD Dissertation, University of Melbourne (2009), Robin Woolven, "Air Raid Precautions in St. Pancras: The Borough against the German Air Force," *Camden History Review* 16 (1989): 20-25, Robin Woolven, "London, Munich, and ARP," *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute* 43 (1998): 54-58, Robin Woolven, "Playing Hitler's Game from Fitzroy Road NW1," *History Review* 23 (1999): 22-25, Robin Woolven, "First in the Country: Dr. Richard Tee and Air Raid Precautions," *Hackney History* 6 (2000): 50-58, Robin Woolven, *Civil Defence in London, 1935-1945: The Formation and Implementation of the Policy for, and the Performance of, the ARP Services in London*, PhD Dissertation, University of London (2002), Michele Haapmaki, *The British Left-Wing and Air Raid Precautions, 1918-1939*, PhD Dissertation, McMaster University (2009), I. F. Clarke, *Voices Prophesying War: Future Wars, 1763-3749* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). Michele Haapmaki has a book forthcoming from I. B. Tauris entitled *The Coming of Aerial War: Culture and Fear of Airborne Attack in Interwar Britain*.

¹² Perhaps the most fascinating of these studies are Sven Lindqvist's *A History of Bombing* (New York: Granta, 2001), W. G. Sebald's *On the Natural History of Destruction* (New York: Random House, 2004), and Ian Patterson's *Guernica and Total War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). See also: Tami Davis Biddle, "Dresden 1945: Reality, History and Memory," *Journal of Military History* 72 (2008): 413-449, Marshall De Bruhl, *Firestorm: Allied Airpower and the Destruction of Dresden* (New York: Random House, 2006), Alexander Downes, *Targeting Civilians in War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), Jörg Friedrich, *The Bombing of Germany: 1940-45* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), Stephen A. Garrett, *Ethics and Airpower in World War Two: The British Bombing of German Cities* (New York: St. Martin's, 1993) A. C. Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities: The History and Moral Legacy of the Bombings of Civilians in Germany and Japan* (New York: Walker, 2006), Mary Nolan, "Germans as Victims during the Second World War: Air Wars, Memory Wars," *Central European History* 38 no. 1 (2005): 7-40, Hugo Slim, *Killing Civilians: Method, Madness, and Morality in War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), Yuki Tanaka and Marilyn B. Young, *Bombing Civilians: A Twentieth-Century History* (New York: New Press, 2009).

World War in Britain, not to mention its being trumpeted as a symbol of British fortitude.¹³ However, Susan R. Grayzel has rightly pointed out that little work has been done to determine how the 1930s laid the groundwork for British reactions – both civilian and military – to the Blitz.¹⁴ More specifically, she argues that mass culture in Britain between the wars not only prepared the British people for the heightened destructiveness of the next war but also helped pave the way for increased state involvement in the lives of the civilian population.¹⁵ This dissertation will build on her excellent book and her chapter in the essay collection *Cities into Battlefields* (2011) on *Things to Come* by providing a lengthier analysis of film.¹⁶

Interwar Aviation on Film

There has also been considerable work done on aviation on film. However, there is a noticeable lack of erudite scholarly analysis in the literature. The two clearest exceptions to this generalization are Michael Paris's *From the Wright Brothers to Top Gun* and Robert Wohl's *The Spectacle of Flight*. Michael Paris's book is an excellent

¹³ Amy Bell, "Landscapes of Fear: Wartime London, 1939-1945," *Journal of British Studies* 48 no. 1 (2009): 153-175, Patrick Bishop, *Fighter Boys: Saving Britain* (London: Harper, 2004), Patrick Bishop, *Bomber Boys: Fighting Back* (London: Harper, 2007), Malcolm Brown, *Spitfire Summer: When Britain Stood Alone* (London: Carlton, 2000), Stephen Bungay, *The Most Dangerous Enemy* (London: Aurum Press, 2000), Angus Calder, *Myth of the Blitz*, (London: Pimlico, 1991), Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain, 1939-1945* (London: Pimlico, 1992), Richard Collier and Peter Townsend, *The Few: Summer 1940* (London: Seven Dials, 1986), Gordon Corrigan, *Blood, Sweat, and Arrogance and the Myths of Churchill's War* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2006), Colin Dobinson, *AA Command: Britain's Anti-Aircraft Defences in the Second World War* (London: Methuen, 2002), Norman Gelb, *Scramble: A Narrative History of the Battle of Britain* (London: Michael Joseph, 1986), James Holland, *The Battle of Britain: Five Months that Changed History* (New York: St. Martin's, 2012), T. C. G. James, *The Growth of Fighter Command* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), Richard Overy, *The Battle of Britain* (London: Penguin, 2000), Clive Ponting, *1940: Myth and Reality* (London: Cardinal, 1991).

¹⁴ Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire*, 321.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Susan Grayzel, "A Promise of Terror to Come: Air Power and the Destruction of Cities in British Imagination and Experience, 1908-1939," in Stefan Goebel and Derek Keane, eds., *Cities into Battlefields: Metropolitan Scenarios of Total War* (London: Ashgate, 2011).

survey of the relationship between aviation, cinema, and culture throughout the twentieth century. It has deeply influenced my approach to this topic. Paris's key argument is to counter what he sees as a widely held tendency to dismiss aviation films as mere action-adventure movies. Instead, through his discussion of France, Germany, Italy, Great Britain, and the United States, he argues aviation films can say much about the anxieties of society at a given time; aviation films, like cinema more broadly, are loaded with cultural signifiers.

Robert Wohl's *The Spectacle of Flight* contains an entire chapter devoted to interwar aviation films. Wohl claims "film determined, as no other cultural form did, the way people saw and understood flight and aviators in this period."¹⁷ He focuses his attention on a select group of American-made films: *Wings*, *Hell's Angels*, *Ceiling Zero* (1935), *Test Pilot* (1938), and *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939).¹⁸ Like Paris, he pinpoints two aviation sub-genres and what made them popular during the interwar period: the First World War aviation film and the service film (those that use daily operations of airlines as their settings). Furthermore, he notes a number of repetitive themes that are also dominant in the films in this dissertation: a male elite that was in love with a new technology; aviation was an exclusively masculine undertaking; pilots were bound by a camaraderie that outsiders could not understand; finally, that war in the air was horrifying and destructive.

Other useful works are Stephen Pendo's *Aviation in the Cinema* (1985), James Farmer's *Celluloid Wings* (1984), and Bertil Skogsberg's *Wings on the Screen* (1981).

¹⁷ Wohl, *Spectacle of Flight*, 3.

¹⁸ *Ceiling Zero*, directed by Howard Hawks (Los Angeles: Warner Bros., 1935), *Test Pilot*, directed by Victor Fleming (Los Angeles: MGM, 1938), *Only Angels Have Wings*, directed by Howard Hawks (Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 1939)

Aviation in the Cinema is a well-researched collection of quite possibly every aviation film made up to its publication. Indeed, anyone looking to undertake research in this field owes a great debt to Pendo for the exhaustiveness of his research. However, *Aviation in the Cinema* is light on analysis. So too are *Celluloid Wings* and *Wings on the Screen*. Both books provide sweeping and entertaining narratives of aviation filmmaking, often focused on directors, techniques, actors, and stories, but spend regrettably little time on analysis and contextualization.¹⁹

As noted, interwar British aviation films have received little attention from historians. Perhaps the mostly closely related to this dissertation's subject is K. R. M. Short's *Screening the Propaganda of British Air Power* (1997). It focuses on Alexander Korda's *The Lion Has Wings* (1939), which began production at the outbreak of the Second World War. In discussing the genesis of *The Lion has Wings*, Short briefly touches on the films and issues in this dissertation. However, his treatments of *RAF*, *The Gap*, and *The Warning* are disappointing. He does not cite the 35mm version of *RAF* held by the BFI. Additionally, *The Warning*, an air defence film released in 1939 to wider distribution and public review than *The Gap* (which he extensively discusses), is not even mentioned in the book.²⁰

¹⁹ James Farmer, *Celluloid Wings* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), Michael Paris, *From the Wright Brothers to Top Gun* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), Stephen Pendo, *Aviation and the Cinema* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1985), and Bertil Skogsberg, *Wings on the Screen* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1981). See also Bruce Orris, *When Hollywood Ruled the Skies* (Hawthorne, CA: Aero Associates, 1984).

²⁰ K. R. M. Short, *Screening the Propaganda of British Airpower* (London: Tonbridge, 1997).

Primary Sources

This dissertation will focus on a wide variety of primary sources. Each chapter has utilized a different mixture of such sources. At the core of the dissertation will be the films under analysis. The majority of the significant films explored in the dissertation – *RAF*, *The Gap*, *The Warning* – are available for viewing at the British Film Institute, either on film or digitally, while *Things to Come* can easily be found online or in public libraries. The Imperial War Museum’s Film Collection has considerable holdings in training and imperial films, though few are discussed here beyond a passing reference.²¹

Newsreels constitute a key part of this dissertation’s source base, given their importance to cinemas during the early sound era. By the 1930s film and newsreels had “joined the newspapers as suppliers of the sum of information.”²² In the case of newsreels, most of the research was conducted online through British Pathé and British Movietone’s websites. Additionally, British Paramount and Gaumont British newsreels are available online through ITN Source. In addition to British newsreel companies, ITN also has over one million hours of digital footage from ITV, Fox News, Fox Movietone, and numerous other news sources.²³ Approximately 1,200 different newsreels were viewed while researching this dissertation, a substantial number, considering during this period the major newsreel companies produced approximately 6,240 newsreel issues

²¹ The IWM has dozens of RAF training films like *Air Compass* (1920). It also possesses films like: *RAF Mildenhall Review*, IWM MTE 227, *Rehearsal Schemes for RAF Aerial Pageant* (1923), *The Eyes of the Army* (1920), *Launch of Airships* (1921), *Trials of Gloucester* (1925), *RAF B Gosport, Annual Inspection Day* (1929), *Launch of Airship R.36* (1921), *Airship R.100* (1929), *RAF Display at Southampton* (1930), *Film based on the Safety of Modern Aviation* MGH 6568 (date unknown), *Cairo to Baghdad Airmail* (1926), IWM 878, *RAF Flight to India* (April 1929), *RAF Links Empire’s Far-flung Colonies, Risalpur to Singapore* MGY 6583, KAY 1615/1.

²² Nicholas Pronay, “British Newsreels in the 1930s, 1. Audience and Producers,” *History* 56 no. 188 (October 1971): 411.

²³ See movietone.com, britishpathe.com, and www.itnsource.com.

between January 1927 and August 1939.²⁴ The increasing digitization of newsreels and their availability online will surely facilitate future scholarship in a surprisingly under-researched, yet highly important, area of British history.

Despite their significance to cinemagoing in interwar Great Britain, newsreels have received surprisingly little attention from historians. Only one book, Anthony Aldgate's *Cinema and History: British Newsreels and the Spanish Civil War* (1979), deals exclusively with newsreels; it is now over thirty years old.²⁵ However, in the late 1970s, Nicholas Pronay and Rachael Low examined newsreels. Pronay wrote a series of short articles in *History* that explored the production, distribution, impact, and reception of British newsreels, while Rachael Low provides a chapter-long analysis of newsreels in her 1979 book *Films of Comment and Persuasion of the 1930s*.²⁶ More recently, newsreels have formed the source base for at least one article on British aviation. Gordon Pirie's 2003 article in the *Historical Journal of Film Radio and Television* provides an in-depth treatment of newsreels covering British imperial aviation. He argues newsreels were likely "more captivating and widely seen" than other mass culture portrayals of

²⁴ Pronay, "British Newsreels in the 1930s, 1. Audience and Producers," 413. Pronay points out that by 1933 the major newsreel companies were producing, between them, about 520 issues per year. Meaning that aerial warfare was appearing in newsreels in Great Britain every week.

²⁵ Anthony Aldgate, *Cinema and History: British Newsreels and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Scolar Press, 1979), Anthony Aldgate, "1930s Newsreels: Censorship and Controversy," *Sight and Sound* 46 no. 3 (Summer 1977): 154-157.

²⁶ Pronay, "British Newsreels in the 1930s, 1. Audience and Producers," and "British Newsreels in the 1930s, 2. Their Policies and Impact," *History* 57 no. 189 (February 1972): 63-72. See Nicholas Hiley and Luke McKernan, "Reconstructing the News: British Newsreel Documentation and the British Universities Newsreel Project," *Film History* 13 no. 2 (2001): 185-199. They provide a comprehensive overview of newsreel sources and scholarship to 2001. Regrettably, their work has inspired little investigation on the part of scholars in the last twelve years. Raymond Fleming, *The American Newsreel, 1911-1967* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), Rachael Low, *Films of Comment and Persuasion in the 1930s*, Luke McKernan, *Topical Budget: The Great British News Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1992).

aviation. He argues newsreels were used to reinforce ideas of the Pax Britannica, along with British social, technological, and cultural superiority.²⁷

There is a substantial body of work on interwar, Second World War, and post-war newsreels in France, Germany, and Europe under occupation. This collection of scholarship – almost entirely journal articles, rather than monographs – has established the viability of newsreels as a historical source. They have proven to be an effective means to conduct research on state attempts to control and shape civilian opinion. More important, they have flagged an important and almost entirely open field of research for those interested in interwar Britain and British film.²⁸

The arguments made surrounding the films in question will be supported by a wide variety of primary documents from archives that were visited on three research trips

²⁷ Gordon Pirie, "Cinema and British Imperial Civil Aviation, 1919-1939," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 23 no. 2: 117-131.

²⁸ Scott L. Althaus, "The Forgotten Role of the Global Newsreel Industry in the Long Transition from Text to Television," *International Journal Of Press/Politics* 15, no. 2 (March 2010): 193-218, Daniel Biltereyst, Brett Bowles, and Roel Vande Winkel, "'A Newsreel of Our Own': The Culture and Commerce of Local Filmed News," *Historical Journal Of Film, Radio & Television* 32, no. 3 (September 2012): 355-360, Brett Bowles, "German Newsreel Propaganda in France, 1940-1944," *Historical Journal Of Film, Radio & Television* 24, no. 1 (March 2004): 45-67, Ciara Chambers, "'British for the British— Irish Events for the Irish: Indigenous Newsreel Production in Ireland," *Historical Journal Of Film, Radio & Television* 32, no. 3 (September 2012): 361-377, Federico Caprotti, "Information Management and Fascist Identity: Newsreels in Fascist Italy," *Media History* 11, no. 3 (December 2005): 177-191, Seth Fein, "New Empire into Old: Making Mexican Newsreels the Cold War Way," *Diplomatic History* 28, no. 5 (November 2004): 703-748, Tore Helseth, "Norwegian Newsreels under German Occupation," *Historical Journal Of Film, Radio & Television* 24, no. 1 (March 2004): 119-132, Sumiko Higashi, "Melodrama, Realism, and Race: World War II Newsreels and Propaganda Film," *Cinema Journal* 37, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 38-61, Kay Hoffmann, "Propagandistic Problems of German Newsreels in World War II," *Historical Journal Of Film, Radio & Television* 24, no. 1 (March 2004): 133-142, Mike Huggins, "'And Now, Something for the Ladies: Representations of Women's Sport in Cinema Newsreels 1918-1939," *Women's History Review* 16, no. 5 (December 2007): 681-700, Martin L. Johnson, "'An Added Bonus: Local Films, Local Newsreels and the Strand News in Warsaw, Indiana (1938-1955)," *Historical Journal Of Film, Radio & Television* 32 no. 3 (September 2012): 401-417, Karel Margry, "Newsreels in Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia," *Historical Journal Of Film, Radio & Television* 24, no. 1 (March 2004): 69-117, David H. Mould, "Historical Trends in the Criticism of the Newsreel and Television News," *Journal Of Popular Film & Television* 12, no. 3 (Fall 1984): 118-126, Pierre Sorlin, "The French Newsreels of the First World War," *Historical Journal Of Film, Radio & Television* 24, no. 4 (October 2004): 507-515, Susan Tegel, "Comment: Third Reich newsreels – An Effective Tool of Propaganda?" *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television*, March 2004: 143-154, Laurent Véray, "1914-1918, The First Media War of the Twentieth Century: The Example of French Newsreels," *Film History* 22, no. 4 (December 2010): 408-425.

in 2009, 2010, and 2012. The Royal Mail Archive, the Mass Observation Archive at the University of Sussex, and the Basil Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (KCL LHC) were consulted during research. The Royal Mail Archive holds some records pertaining to the GPO Film Unit, which were consulted regarding imperial air films that were not included in the final version of the dissertation. The Mass Observation Archive at the University of Sussex holds the records of the Mass Observation movement that used volunteers to chronicle as much of everyday life in Britain as possible between 1937 and 1950. Specifically, it holds data on ARP and cinema attendance that is used in chapters four and seven. The Liddell Hart Centre was used exclusively to determine Basil Liddell Hart's role in the production of *Things to Come*.

The holdings of the British Film Institute Library (BFI), and the National Archives at Kew (TNA) are the backbone of the dissertation. Each chapter utilizes the holdings of the British Film Institute's library. They were important in two particular aspects. The library has extensive holdings on film promotion, including press books, posters, campaign stories, interviews, and stills. These were used to help determine how filmmakers tried to market aviation films to the British public.²⁹ Second, the BFI holdings of press clippings, reviews, and trade publication reviews of films have proven very helpful in trying to sort out that great "imponderable" that Richards refers to in *Age of the Dream Palace*. Where cinemagoing responses and box-office statistics are lacking, film reviews have helped sort out how British cinemagoers may have responded to films.

Chapters four, six, and seven rely heavily on archival sources at the National Archives that have previously been underused or entirely unused. They have proven

²⁹ Alan Burton and Steve Chibnall, "Promotional Activities and Showmanship in British Film Exhibition," 83-99.

especially fruitful in my attempts to draw connections between mass culture and government policy during the 1930s. Chapter four uses a variety of files in the National Archives' Air 1, Air 2, and Air 19 Series to highlight the close connections between popular cinema and government policy, and how the Royal Air Force at least was acutely aware of these connections and the need to manipulate them. Chapters six and seven use a similar methodology to demonstrate the conceptualization, production, and eventual release of *The Gap* (1937) and *The Warning* (1939) using files from the Air series, along with the Home Office 45 Series, Home Office 186 Series, and War Office 32 Series.

Lights, Camera, Action:**Airmindedness and the Cinema in Interwar Great Britain**

This chapter will set the stage of the rest of the dissertation by exploring the popularity and importance of both flight and cinema to interwar Great Britain. First, it will demonstrate the uniqueness of the Britain's responses to the airplane, particularly how fear of aerial destruction gripped the country, its government, and armed forces in the second-half of the 1930s. Second, it will establish the popularity of the cinema in Britain during the 1930s, and point to the classes and genders that were most likely to be interested in the films under consideration. Ultimately, the same young men and boys who were most interested in aviation were the ones most likely to go to the cinema. They would be the same generation who would fight with the RAF and other British services during the Second World War.

Airmindedness and the Industrialized World, 1919-1939

The airplane captured the Western collective imagination well before the First World War. Throughout Europe, people flocked to watch the newest airplane take flight, enjoy air shows, or celebrate exploits of aviators such as Gabriel Santos-Dumont or Louis Blériot. However, during the interwar period interest in the airplane increased dramatically and became more politically charged, becoming known as airmindedness. This was a widely used term during the period to describe an interest in, knowledge of,

and affinity for aviation. In most of the developed world, airmindedness went beyond interest in flight and encapsulated the hopes and visions for the future that were attached to the airplane. This sort of belief in the airplane was felt throughout the developed world as each nation reacted to the technology differently.

To leaders of the totalitarian regimes, the airplane not only showed the rigid discipline of their people and their adherence to the ideology, but their technological prowess. Even though the Soviet Union lagged behind those in the West in aeronautical developments, the airplane and the aviator were central to Soviet notions of progress. The airplane was a symbol of industrialization and Stalin's Five Year Plans, while the aviator was a hero.¹ Michael Paris argues that Stalin may have used aviation to distract the population from the purges.² In Italy, the airplane became a symbol of the future for fascists such as Gabriel D'Annunzio, Italo Balbo, and Benito Mussolini. The government launched extensive publicity campaigns of Balbo's aeronautical feats; he also happened to be the country's air minister. They felt it could help restore Italy to its former glory and position it at the leading edge of a new world order. Airmindedness was also widespread in Germany during both the Weimar and Nazi periods. Germans during the Weimar Republic celebrated the achievements of the country's airships and monoplanes. Huge crowds attended air shows, with many pilots receiving huge celebrations. Under Hitler, the airplane was wedded to Nazi ideology and became a symbol of German technological prowess, rebirth, and Nazi success. The youth of Germany were directed to take an interest in aeronautics. The bomber was used as a

¹ Palmer, *Dictatorship of the Air*, 190.

² Paris, *From the Wright Brothers to Top Gun*, 97. This is confirmed by Kurt Schlögel, *Moscow, 1937* (London: Polity, 2012), 313.

rallying and control point, as the civilian population was expected to prepare for aerial warfare.

Airmindedness also appeared in the Western democracies. In France, the flights of Roland Garros, Jean Mermoz, and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry became entrenched in the popular discourse as they broke aviation records and tried to establish airmail services throughout the world. The men became national heroes and personifications of the French Republic.³ In the United States, airmindedness had perhaps its strongest and most articulate manifestation. Corn's "winged gospel" was displayed through people exchanging wedding vows in the air, building toys, and theorizing about how to get an airplane in every garage. Charles Lindbergh personified American interest in aviation. In 1927, four million revellers greeted him in New York on his return from Europe; he began a nation-wide tour that newspapers seemed to ceaselessly cover.⁴

Spectacle and Inspiration: Britain and the Airplane

Britain's relationship with the airplane during the interwar period was similar to other developed nations. It was uniquely related to Britain's national character: the maintenance of the Empire, as a signifier of Britain's technological and social mastery, as

³ Wohl, *Spectacle of Flight*, 156-211.

⁴ The British reception for Charles Lindbergh in 1927 was no less jubilant than anywhere else in Europe. The BBC provided hourly reports on Lindbergh's progress as he made his way to Paris. Crowds as big as those in France greeted the American aviator when he arrived at Croydon on May 29, 1927. The crowd (estimated to be about 120,000) actually turned riotous with enthusiasm as thousands of people pushed forward across barriers to get a closer look at Lindbergh and the *Spirit of St. Louis*. It actually took Lindbergh three attempts to try to land, on account of the airfield being filled with revellers. Lindbergh's time in London was a whirlwind of cheering crowds, gala receptions and Royal visits. As was the case with the exploits of Amy Johnson and Alan Cobham, Lindbergh's events in England received lots of print in newspapers. What many did not realize was that Charles Lindbergh had not been the first to cross the Atlantic non-stop. That feat was carried out by two British aviators, Alcock and Brown in 1919. Penrose, *British Aviation: The Adventuring Years*, 487.

a rallying point for an economically depressed country, and a threat to the island's security.⁵

British interest in the airplane during the interwar years was partly fuelled by the press, especially newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* and the *Times* that were owned by Lord Northcliffe. They paid a considerable amount of attention to flight during the 1920s and 1930s, by sponsoring flights, holding competitions, and extensively covering aerial achievements. Additionally, a large journal and magazine industry developed around aviation between 1919 and 1939. *The Aeroplane*, *Flight*, *Air*, *Air Review* and later *Popular Flying* were among the most popular flying periodicals in the United Kingdom. They acted as aeronautical advocates, including pushing for the growth of the Imperial Mail Scheme, Imperial Airways, and the British aviation industry. Additionally, they chronicled and called for the continued growth of the RAF and the Air Ministry. Furthermore, they contributed to the cult of the flying celebrity by keenly following the exploits of aviators such as of Alan Cobham, Amy Johnson, James Mollison, and others.⁶ In summary, these magazines tried to make the British public as airminded as possible.⁷ Like Northcliffe's papers, the *Aeroplane*, the leading aviation magazine in Great Britain, also had a political agenda.⁸ It could be counted on for a right-wing assessment of developments in British aviation, often not mincing words about its views on a particular airplane or the need for parliament to improve British aerial defences and the RAF.⁹ For example, the *Aeroplane* openly targeted the League of Nations and other international

⁵ Paris, *From the Wright Brothers to Top Gun*, 5.

⁶ Penrose, *Widening Horizons*, 15.

⁷ Penrose, *The Adventuring Years*, 147.

⁸ Penrose, *The Ominous Skies*, 17, 31 and 166. However, some of the advice the *Aeroplane* wished to distribute was often skewed by its right-wing political biases. In some cases it advocated for improvements to British aerial defence without acknowledging that Germany was the potential enemy.

⁹ Graham Smith, *Taking to the Skies*, 223.

organizations and advocated that British government focus its efforts building an air force that could enforce peace.¹⁰

British fiction writers also took advantage of airmindedness. The most popular example was the Biggles stories written by former RFC/RAF officer Captain William Earl Johns. Johns was also a contributor to *Popular Flying*, where the Biggles stories first appeared. The seventeen different Biggles stories published before the outbreak of the Second World War told the story of Captain James Biggles, a decorated RFC pilot and later, during the interwar years, a globe-trotting pilot-for-hire. To many British schoolboys during the 1930s – who read the novels in huge numbers – Biggles was a first-rate hero. Interest in the Biggles novels, as Michael Paris notes, tapped into a deeper interest in the aviator during the interwar years that he dubs “the cult of the air fighter.”¹¹ Indeed, a number of leading British aviators during the Second World War had their first taste of aviation through the Biggles books.¹² Along with the Biggles tales, the British public also participated in the “cult of the air fighter” by voraciously reading the biographies of Mick Mannock and Albert Ball.

Air pageants and air shows were probably the most sensational and most public manifestations of Britain’s airmindedness during the interwar period. The largest and most famous of Britain’s air pageants was annual the Hendon Air Pageant.¹³ Hendon, and other pageants typically featured aerial stunts like air races, parachuting, aerobatics,

¹⁰ Penrose, *Widening Horizons*, 103.

¹¹ Michael Paris, “The Rise of the Airman: The Origins of Air Force Elitism, 1908-1918,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 28 no 1. (1993) : 124.

¹² Peter Ellis, *Biggles! The Life Story of Captain W. E. Johns* (Godmanstone: Veloce, 1993).

¹³ David Omissi, “The Hendon Air Pageant, 1920-1937,” in *Popular Imperialism and the Military, 1850-1950*, John M. MacKenzie, ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 199. The RAF, especially in the 1920s, felt its best post-war operational niche could be found policing the expanded British Empire. As a result, the pageant also had a noticeable imperialist tone to it. See also Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control*.

and dog fights; it often concluded with the RAF attacking some kind of imperial stronghold.¹⁴ By the 1930s, the Hendon Air Pageant averaged about 150,000 visitors per year. Often the RAF invited school children to the pageant for free; 50,000 children attended the pageant in 1932.¹⁵ Starting in 1934, Imperial Air Days also became an immensely popular aeronautical event. Between 1934 and 1939 they drew annual crowds of at least 100,000 and the 1939 celebration attracted over one million visitors to 80 RAF bases across Britain. The RAF opened its bases to civilians and allowed them to tour the grounds, inspect the airplanes, and talk to the pilots.¹⁶ As will be explored in greater detail in chapter four, these pageants were more than exhibitions. They actively tried to show the RAF's sophistication, the skill of its pilots, along with its importance to controlling the Empire and protecting the country from attack.

Air races also acted as clear demonstrators of the level of air-mindedness in Great Britain during the interwar years. Britain's foremost air race – the King's Cup – typically drew huge crowds throughout the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁷ The 1934 MacRobertson Air Race between England and Australia became a media sensation in Great Britain as the country's best aviators tried to beat each other and other celebrity fliers from around the world to Melbourne from their starting point at RAF Mildenhall. The King and Queen were among the over 70,000 that watched the start of the race.¹⁸ The Schneider Trophy,

¹⁴ Graham Smith, *Taking to the Skies*, 241 and Francis, *The Flyer*, 16. Many of the air parades at Hendon were put to classical music. Omissi, "The Hendon Air Pageant," 205. Italo Balbo especially enjoyed this segment when he visited in 1927 and 1932.

¹⁵ Omissi, "The Hendon Air Pageant," 213. Hendon was especially well attended in 1937 – the first pageant after the coronation of George VI.

¹⁶ Graham Smith, *Taking to the Skies*, 240. The Empire Air Day was the idea of J. A. Chamier, the Secretary General of the Air League of the British Empire. He was determined to make the youth of Britain as air-minded as possible.

¹⁷ Graham Smith, *Taking to the Skies*, 278.

¹⁸ Graham Smith, *Taking to the Skies*, 242. Australian Sir MacPherson Robertson put on the race and offered a gold trophy and £15,000 for the fastest trip between England and Australia.

the most coveted aeronautical award during the interwar years, pushed Britain into the development of the Spitfire. Before that, Ramsay MacDonald's refusal to pay for the RAF's entry to the 1930 competition caused a public outcry and provoked those on the extreme right, like Lady Houston, to attack what she saw as MacDonald's lack of patriotism.¹⁹

Britain's record-breaking and best fliers became celebrities and rallying points for nationalist celebrations. Alan Cobham, a darling of the British newspaper industry, was surely Britain's most famous flyer during the interwar years, and acts as a clear example. The extensive media coverage his aeronautical feats received, from his flying circus and flying taxis of the early 1920s and winning the King's Cup Air Race in 1924 to his record-setting flights to Australia and Africa during the late 1920s and early 1930s, and his surveying of air routes for Imperial Airways, helped not only build Britain's air routes, but also fuelled the cult of personality around flyers.²⁰ Cobham was keenly aware of the power of his public image and used it to promote airmindedness in Britain, generate revenue for Imperial Airways, and rally Britons around the flag. He repeatedly stated his primary interest was to "get the public airminded."²¹ His 1925-26 flight to South Africa deliberately attracted the media through its selection of landing sites and methodical pace. His return from flights to South Africa and Australia in 1926 became nationalistic spectacles. On returning from Australia, he flew down the Thames past the Palace of Westminster that had been adorned with Union Jacks to celebrate his flight as

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Cobham fought with the Royal Flying Corps during the First World War. After the war he became a test pilot with de Havilland and then went on to fly with the Berkshire Aviation Company. Penrose, *The Adventuring Years*, 29. His contribution to flying in Great Britain was considerable. Beyond his leading role in the promotion of airmindedness amongst the British, Cobham tested and flew countless new aircraft designs and invented a mid-air refuelling system. Graham Smith, *Taking to the Skies*, 149 and Penrose, *The Adventuring Years*, 131 & 157.

²¹ Penrose, *The Adventuring Years*, 350.

thousands of Londoners cheered; Cobham's achievement was a British one.²² In 1929, he toured 110 different cities in Britain to promote aviation and to make "the skyways highways."²³ He continued to tour the country each summer until 1935 with his flying circus.

Despite the efforts of men like Cobham and the hopes of Imperial Airways, commercial aviation remained unprofitable throughout the interwar years largely because only the country's wealthiest could enjoy it. In fact, imperial aviation was so sparsely used that British airlines were never able to carry more than 10,000 passengers in any year between 1930 and 1939.²⁴ This, however, did not stop flying and Imperial Airways from becoming important rallying points for British nationalists. According to Gordon Pirie's study of imperial aviation in the 1920s and 1930s, when interwoven with Britain's maritime and imperial narratives, aviation became the new "imperial flag bearer." It had especially powerful resonance, since the empire was facing new political challenges in delinquent colonies like India and economic challenges from the costs of the Great War and deep economic depression in regions like South Wales, Clydeside, Liverpool, and Tyneside. To many in Britain, the airplane offered new hope; it was the conveyor and clearest symbol of a new form of imperialism. Additionally, it served to show the world Britain's technological prowess, ambition, and colonial mastery.²⁵

²² Penrose, *The Adventuring Years*, 449. Cobham was knighted for his accomplishment.

²³ John Myerscough, "Airport Provision in the Inter-war Years," *Journal of Contemporary History* 20 no. 1 (January 1985) : 50.

²⁴ An air ticket between England and India cost approximately £150, more than double a sea voyage and nearly half the average annual salary of the middle-class Briton. Gordon Pirie, "Passenger Traffic in the 1930s on British Imperial Air Routes: Refinement and Revision," *Journal of Transport History* 25 no. 1: 68. See also Pugh, *We Danced All Night*, 321, Robin Higham, *Britain's Imperial Air Routes*, and Dorthe Gert Simonsen, "Accelerating Modernity: Time-Space Compression in the Wake of the Aeroplane," *Journal of Transport History* 26 no. 2 (September 2005): 98-117.

²⁵ Pirie, *Air Empire: British Imperial Civil Aviation*, 235-242.

The country's extreme right took these ideas further and were amongst the staunchest supporters of aviation. Or as Liz Millward puts it, "where right-wing elites clustered, pilots were sure to be found."²⁶ The British aviation industry was dominated by right-wing figures such as Lord Rothermere, Lord Beaverbrook, and Lady Houston.²⁷ Rothermere argued for an air dictator to control the entire British aviation industry. Houston's £100,000 support for the Schneider Trophy and the Everest Air teams was only surpassed by her £200,000 contribution to Oswald Mosley and British Union of Fascists (BUF). She used these flights as political attacks on National Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, who had refused to fund these nationalist exploits, failing to sense level of interest in the British public and press for the flight.²⁸ In Parliament, aviation became a hot topic for MPs to support, especially Tory backbenchers.

As Colin Cook highlights, the aviator became an essential part of British fascism's notions of modernity and masculinity during the interwar years.²⁹ Drawing on the writings of T. E. Lawrence and other First World War veterans, along with other military theorists like J. F. C. Fuller, Mosley came to believe that aviators would be elites in a new British society and the airplane would be a central symbol of British modernity. He felt Britain should be turned into a nation of aviators to prepare the country for a future clash in the air, but also reverse the tide of national decay.³⁰ This would be achieved by widespread airmindedness campaigns and national pilot training programmes, along with more importance placed on aviation in the government and the

²⁶ Millward, *Women in British Imperial Air Space*, 23.

²⁷ Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane*, 48. Her publication *Saturday Review* openly promoted the regimes of Hitler and Mussolini.

²⁸ Zander, "(Right) Wings over Everest."

²⁹ Cook, "A Fascist Memory: Oswald Mosley and the Myth of the Airman," 147.

³⁰ Cook, "A Fascist Memory," 150. The air would be the important theatre in a future clash between nations.

expansion and improvement of the British aeronautical industry. To fascists in Britain and across Europe, the airplane and the aviator were, as Cook puts it, a “metaphor of their national rebirth.”³¹

No Longer an Island: British Anxiety Surrounding the Airplane

By the mid-1930s, the solo flights of pioneers such as Cobham, Lindbergh, Johnson, and Mollison, along with the air races and flying circuses were drawing less public interest, though the airplane was still an object of wonder. At the same time, war fears became more pronounced. With that, the pilot and airplane started to be associated just as much with death and destruction from the sky, as they were with nationalism, patriotism, and progress. The bomber started casting longer shadows in the minds of the British public, or as Uri Bialer has put it, “the fear of aerial bombardment in interwar Britain was unprecedented and unique.”³² While the German aerial attacks of the First World War did not leave the country seriously damaged, they left deep scars in the psyches of the British public, politicians, and aerial theorists.³³ The Hendon Air Pageant, as noted earlier, flaunted the RAF’s ability to bring destruction on imperial adversaries from the sky.³⁴ These fears were made worse in 1935 when Hitler formally announced the existence of a nearly two-thousand-aircraft and twenty-thousand-man Luftwaffe.

Views of the bomber, in both Britain and around Europe, were largely influenced by Giulio Douhet’s 1923 book *Il dominio dell’aria (Command of the Air)*. In it, Douhet argued that bombers would be able to cross any defensive lines that nation-states could

³¹ Ibid., 151.

³² Bialer, *The Shadow of the Bomber*, 2.

³³ German attacks against Great Britain between 1915 and 1918 killed approximately 3,000 civilians.

³⁴ Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control*. The RAF was being used against insurgents in Afghanistan, Egypt, Somaliland, Palestine, and Iraq.

erect and then attack the civilian population and industrial bases directly, breaking the morale of a nation in a matter of days, while leaving its greatest cities in complete ruin.³⁵ Even though the First World War had disproved ideas that civilian morale would crack under attack and despite the fact that mid-1930s bombers were incapable of razing entire cities, British politicians, theorists, and the public alike held this apocalyptic fear of the bomber.³⁶ Uri Bialer argues that the fear of the bomber was so strong in Great Britain during the 1930s that it actually influenced major cabinet decisions regarding international agreements, dominated military planning, and guided British rearmament. Overwhelming fear of the bomber can be traced back to a few critical causes: one, British politicians were concerned that they stood to lose the “inviolability” granted the United Kingdom by geography; two, they exaggerated in their minds the bomber’s destructiveness as demonstrated during Mussolini’s Abyssinian conquest and the Spanish Civil War; three, British military theorists, having only limited data on the bomber’s power, often overestimated how destructive the bomber could be if it was used on a large scale in future wars; four, there was a rise in dystopian predictions of the future in British literary circles – largely inspired by the military’s lack of foresight and the worsening political situation.³⁷ Finally, this was made worse by the wide belief that there was no defence against the bomber, or that the “the bomber will always get through,” in the

³⁵ Giulio Douhet, *Command of the Air* (New York: Arno Press, 1972).

³⁶ Malcolm Smith, *British Air Strategy Between the Wars*, 317.

³⁷ Bialer, *Shadow of the Bomber*, 4 & 151-160. Bialer argues that the bomber represented the culmination of centuries of fear regarding the invasion of Great Britain, beginning with the industrialization of sea warfare, continuing through the Gotha raids of the First World War. Bialer associates the fear of future destruction with the increasing interest in technological achievement and the repercussions this had on the imagination of average Britons.

words of Stanley Baldwin. Many believed in the event of a war, the airplane would tear apart Britain's social and political fabric, along with obliterating its infrastructure.³⁸

The Home and War Offices were so concerned about aerial destruction that they were actually discussing the number of police officers that would be required to control civilians in the event of an aerial attack; it was assumed the civilian population would descend into mass hysteria or become psychological casualties in the event of an attack.³⁹ Britain's leading military theorists also believed in the bomber's destructive qualities. In his 1935 book *War From the Air*, L. E. O. Charlton argued that Great Britain would come under massive bomb and gas attacks and the British public would be driven underground. At the same time, the nerve of the labouring classes would be broken during such a conflict and they would become "difficult to control."⁴⁰ Similarly, the *Times's* military affairs correspondent and the country's most famous military theorist – Basil Liddell Hart – publicly mused about his fears of the bomber in his book *Paris, Or the Future of War*. In it, he contended that an enemy could be knocked out of a war quickly by attacks against its civilian population. In *Defence of Britain*, he stated the bomber was the "greatest common danger today."⁴¹ As will be demonstrated in chapter five, Liddell Hart would leave this important imprint on *Things to Come*.

Conflicts in the 1930s helped fuel these fears. In January 1932, Japanese carrier-based aircraft bombed Shanghai, causing widespread civilian casualties. Three years later, bombers were used against civilians during Italian operations in Abyssinia.

³⁸ House of Commons Debates, November 10, 1932. Malcolm Smith, "A Matter of Faith," 426, Powers, *Strategy Without Slide-Rule*, 208. Bialer, *The Shadow of the Bomber*, 3.

³⁹ Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 110.

⁴⁰ L. E. O. Charlton, *War From the Air* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1935), 173.

⁴¹ Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 103. See also Basil Liddell Hart, *Paris, Or the Future of War* (New York: Putnam, 1925) and Basil Liddell Hart, *Defence of Britain* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 162.

Bomber fears were brought to Europe proper with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. Numerous Spanish cities such as Madrid, Barcelona, and most famously Guernica were bombed by relatively small numbers of airplanes, leading many to believe that war between Germany and Britain would be much more destructive.⁴² Still, British military observers noted that strategic raids did not adversely affect Spanish production and, contrary to the Air Ministry's suspicions, the morale of Spanish workers usually remained intact.⁴³ It was the press who overstated the devastation in Spain. If anything, the wars in Asia, Abyssinia and Spain should have tempered British fears of the bomber, but they had the opposite effect.⁴⁴ According to their own government, the British public had every reason to believe that a major war fought in the air would bring about the destruction of civilization.

British fiction-writers seized on and fuelled this fear of aerial attack. However, this was not unique to the interwar period; this type of next-war novel had been popular in Britain since the 1870s, with many stories focusing on aviation.⁴⁵ Yet, during in interwar years the depiction of aerial warfare became that much more grim.⁴⁶ This could also be connected to a greater sense of malaise in England between the wars regarding

⁴² Wohl, *Spectacle of Flight*, 219.

⁴³ Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 117.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁴⁵ Caedel, "Popular Fiction and the Next War, 1918 to 1939," 163. Caedel points to three strains of next war fiction: one, invasion fear in the lead-up to the First World War; two, authors like H. G. Wells and Jules Verne focusing on futuristic developments as part of good stories; three, and most important to this study, moralistic warnings about the potential destructive nature of future scientific wars. British popular culture and literature alike were filled with dozens, if not hundreds of yarns of impending destruction and German invasion. Niall Ferguson, in *The Pity of War*, examines the pre First World War apocalyptic genre. Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 1-5. Harold F. Wyatt, "The Wings of War," *The Nineteenth Century and After* 66 (September 1909), H. G. Wells, *The War in the Air* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1908), *The War of the Worlds* (London: Heinemann, 1951) and *The Shape of Things to Come*. *The Shape of Things to Come* is especially important because it is the source material for the film *Things to Come*. Michael Paris, *Winged Warfare: The Literature and Theory of Aerial in Britain, 1859-1917* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

⁴⁶ Caedel, "Popular Fiction and the Next War," 165.

the decline of capitalism and the collapse of the British Empire.⁴⁷ As early as the 1920s British novelists such as Hugh Addison fictionalized the destruction of London by aerial attack; in his *The Battle of London* (1923), Soviet revolutionaries attack the city. Fictional depictions of aerial destruction only became more common in the mid-1920s with books such as *The Broken Trident* (1926), *The Navigators* (1926), and *The War God Walks Again* (1926), the last of which, written by Britten Austin, was actually a series of novels fictionalizing the work of J. F. C. Fuller and Basil Liddell Hart.⁴⁸ In Austin's work, gas is used to great effect to destroy cities. Many books depicting aerial attacks in future wars focused on the use of poison gases. For instance, Viscount Tiverton's 1926 novel *1944* portrayed London being destroyed by gas attacks and high explosives. Similarly, Stephen Southwold's *The Gas War of 1940* (1931) tells the story of the destruction of France and the subsequent pacification of London, and other major cities around the world, using gas and high explosives.⁴⁹ Not only did authors in the interwar period gravitate towards this genre because they hoped to advance an anti-war message, but also because it was commercially successful. For example, *The Gas War of 1940* – which depicts 1.5 billion people being killed – sold approximately 100,000 copies.⁵⁰ War fictionalizations continued to be popular throughout the 1930s. Frank McIlraith and Roy Connolly's *Invasion from the Air: A Prophetic Novel* (1934) along with Ladbrooke Black's *Poison War* (1933) and John Gloag's *Tomorrow* (1932) were especially popular.

⁴⁷ Richard Overy, *The Morbid Years: Britain between the Wars* (London: Allen Lane, 2009). Overy's recent history of Britain during the interwar period paints a picture of Britain captivated by Oswald Spengler's notion of the decline of the West. For example, British economists and popular commentators alike felt that capitalism was at best "on trial" during the 1920s and 1930s or, at worst, in its death throes. Even John Maynard Keynes was unwilling to jump to capitalism's defence in the period, remaining consistently ambiguous as to what the future would hold.

⁴⁸ Caedel, "Popular Fiction and the Next War," 167.

⁴⁹ Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 106.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 171.

Tomorrow depicts the world of the late 1990s in which human beings are doomed to tribalism and eventually extinction as a result of a gas war. Later, H. G. Wells's *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933) tells the story of Britain destroyed and then reborn by aviation. As international tensions heightened in the late 1930s and it became more apparent that explosive attack was more likely than gas attacks, the focus of war novels shifted from death and destruction to the origins of the conflicts and the defence of civilians. Good examples include books such as *Four Days War* (1936), *Air-god's Parade* (1935), and *Chaos* (1938). Air-war fictions culminated in Nevil Shute's *What Happened to the Corbetts* (1939) in which an unnamed nation attacks Southampton from the air, destroying food distribution and the sewers, causing starvation, disease, and chaos.⁵¹

The Media of the Masses: The Cinema in Interwar Great Britain

Britons consumed film more than any other mass media during the 1930s. In his important study of England in the first-half of the twentieth century Ross McKibbin stated the "cinema was the most important medium of popular culture in the period, and the English went to the cinema more than any other people."⁵² John Sedgwick has argued that the cinema accounted for two-thirds of all British entertainment spending during the 1930s.⁵³ In 1934, the first year for which statistics were kept, 903 million

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 178-182.

⁵² A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1940* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 314. A. J. P. Taylor declares that cinema was the "essential social habit of the age." Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). McKibbin goes on: "excluding radio listening, which was largely a household activity and available to the majority of the population only from the mid-1930s, but not excluding sport, no other cultural activity of the period approached cinema-going in its general popularity."

⁵³ John Sedgwick, "Cinema-going Preferences in Britain in the 1930s," in *The Unknown 1930s: A Alternative History of the British Cinema, 1929-1939*, ed. Jeffrey Richards (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998), 2.

movie tickets were sold; by 1937 it was 946, and 990 million by 1939.⁵⁴ The cinema's reach is even more impressive if we consider the 19 million weekly attendances in 1938, compared to the 10.48 million in newspaper circulation on weekdays and 13.59 million on weekends. Cinema construction also reflects this increase in popularity. For example in 1926, there were about 3,000 cinemas in Britain; by 1938 there was just fewer than 5,000. The actual increase is much higher, considering hundreds of cinemas without sound were demolished between 1927 and 1939 and replaced by those that could show films with sound.⁵⁵

Who, however, was going to British cinemas? Briefly, the younger and poorer the individual, the more likely he or she was to go to the cinema. For the youth of Great Britain, going to the cinema was one of their most important leisure activities. The first systematic survey of British cinema habits, in 1934, showed that 80 per cent of cinemagoers chose the cheap seats, suggesting that most cinemagoers were working class. Further, the *Social Survey of the Merseyside* confirmed that 40 per cent of residents went weekly and a quarter went at least twice a week. The Carnegie Trust Survey and surveys in Birmingham corroborated these findings, and support contentions that the working class went in larger numbers. In fact, Nicholas Pronay and D. W. Spring have argued that film was “the medium of the working classes.”⁵⁶ Conversely, the middle and upper classes did not attend movies in large numbers, though their attendance numbers increased as the interwar period went on. The cinema only grew more important amongst the middle classes during the interwar years, as cinemas appeared

⁵⁴ Richards, *Age of the Dream Palace*, 11. John Sedgwick points out that by 1934 there was one cinema seat for every twelve people in Great Britain. John Sedgwick, *Popular Filmgoing in 1930s Britain: A Choice of Pleasures* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), 46.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁶ Pronay and Spring, *Propaganda Politics and Film*, 15-18.

along with the new suburban developments that ringed the London and the large conurbations.

A person's age and gender also influenced their cinemagoing habits. Working and middle-class school-aged boys – the same generation who would fight in the Second World War – were amongst the biggest consumers of the cinema. In the 1930s, they were becoming increasingly likely to turn in their books and pulp fiction for the movies.⁵⁷ Women were also more likely to attend the cinema than men, especially matinees.⁵⁸ Each segment of British society appears to have had different taste in films. The working class generally preferred films that were romantic, action-packed, and with limited dialogue. For example, a survey of cinemagoers in London's East End preferred high-value productions with "movement and action" that largely came from the United States. The upper classes preferred dramas, wholesome comedies, and films with lots of banter.⁵⁹ They were also more willing to attend British productions. This could imply either a heightened sense of nationalism, or a taste for the highbrow dialogue-driven British picture. Unlike the working class, who went to the cinema as habit, the upper classes had to be drawn to the theatre by appealing pictures. This is not, however, to state that upper-class viewers preferred British films; like their contemporaries, they were more likely to attend the more technically impressive, expensive, and star-studded offerings from Hollywood, such as *Hell's Angels* and *The Dawn Patrol*.⁶⁰

However, British-made films were not entirely shunned by the British public. In fact, the country maintained one of the world's largest movie industries, with some

⁵⁷ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, 420.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 421.

⁵⁹ *Commission on Educational and Cultural Films, The Film in National Life* (London, 1932) cited in Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace*, 11.

⁶⁰ Richards, *Age of the Dream Palace*, 29-32.

talented emerging directors such as Alfred Hitchcock and skilled producers such as Alexander Korda. Especially between 1932 and 1937 when the Cinematograph Films Act (1927) was protecting British-made films, they had a major impact on the cinema at home. However, that contribution and the British market were never large enough to sustain studios like the ones in Los Angeles.⁶¹ This dissertation will touch on two especially popular players in British cinema: Alexander Korda and George Formby.

Rachael Low, one of the most published writers on interwar cinema, contends that it was during the 1930s that film's "value as a form of communication was emerging fast," especially documentaries.⁶² The British documentary film movement, led by men such as John Grierson at the GPO Film Unit, actively tried to educate the public. At the same time, others like Paul Rotha felt the cinema could actually influence opinion. During the 1930s, the documentary film movement in Britain produced at least 2,500 films.⁶³ Every stakeholder in British politics and society was making documentary films, from political parties and the government to trade unions and lobby groups. The result was huge quantities of films on topics ranging from the railways, the Royal Mail, air transportation, mountain climbing, Africa, India, and so on. The Conservative Party actually led the way in the use of cinema, using newsreels to promote Stanley Baldwin during the 1935 election; it is estimated those newsreels reached over 20 million Britons.⁶⁴ By the start of the Second World War those, like Grierson, who felt that film could only educate and was devoid of political elements or persuasive strength, were becoming fewer. By the mid-1930s, the British government, increasingly interested in

⁶¹ Sedgwick, *Popular Filmgoing in 1930s Britain: A Choice of Pleasures*, 246.

⁶² Low, *Films of Comment and Persuasion of the 1930s*.

⁶³ Low, *Documentary and Educational Films of the 1930s*, 4.

⁶⁴ J. A. Ramsden, "Baldwin and Film," in *Propaganda Politics and Film*, ed. Nicholas Pronay and D. W. Spring (London: MacMillan, 1982), 6.

“communications” and surer of film’s persuasive power over the masses, started to produce films to control and influence.⁶⁵

British newsreels were also widely viewed during the interwar period. Approximately one billion cinema attendees in 1939 would have almost all watched newsreels before their feature films.⁶⁶ Or, as Nicholas Pronay argues, “over half” the British population viewed newsreels on a weekly basis during the 1930s. In fact, by 1938 there were at least fifty theatres in the UK devoted to showing newsreels, one in each major city. Pronay goes on to make a convincing argument that newsreels would likely have been more influential with the working classes than newspapers or radio, but less so with the middle and upper classes, since they were more likely to get their news from the daily broadsheets.⁶⁷

The newsreel industry operated much like the newspaper industry. Film crews headed out to breaking stories and stood side by side with newspaper reporters, or they were set up for scheduled events. An editor would then decide on the lead story and select the rest of the issue’s material. After the reel was assembled, sound effects and voiceovers were added and it was printed and sent out to its circuit of cinemas.⁶⁸ Typically, newsreel companies were subsidiaries of large production studios and the reels were included in the films they exported. Generally, newsreels were well received by

⁶⁵ Pronay and Spring, *Propaganda Politics and Film*, 6. Pronay and Spring’s book highlights how British government officials and political staffers had been convinced by the experience of the Great War that propaganda and carefully crafted public relations policies could effectively shape public opinion. The results of this belief, at least in the context of this dissertation, are clearly on display in chapters four, six, and seven.

⁶⁶ Nicholas Pronay, “British Newsreels in the 1930s, 1. Audience and Producers.”

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 415.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 417. Since printing was expensive, newsreels would first appear in first-run cinemas, then move on to lower-tier theatres. A run for a newsreel typically lasted three weeks.

cinema audiences who, according to Rachael Low, “always welcomed the chance to see the people, places, and events they read about in newspapers.”⁶⁹

The cinema was not only widely consumed, but historians have argued it was widely influential in Britain. Jeffrey Richards, in his significant history of interwar British cinema, *The Age of the Dream Palace*, argues that during the interwar years the cinema was able to legitimize unseen elements of society, enforce social mores, isolate deviants, promote uniformity in dress and style, and filter the portrayal of certain groups and issues. According to Richards, “the cinema played an important role in the maintenance of the hegemony of the ruling class.”⁷⁰ Still, film historians like Raphael Samuel, Rachael Low, and John Sedgwick argue the cinema cannot be seen merely as a tool of the elite. Audiences played a huge role in determining what appeared on screen, since it was their interests and tastes that determined, in part, what films were produced. In other words, the cinema was trying to “sell people their own imaginations.”⁷¹ In the case of aerial warfare, the cinema was selling people back their own collective imaginings about First World War pilots and bombing.

The National Government acutely felt the importance of the cinema. Baldwin and his colleagues felt cinema could help harden British public opinion against Bolshevism and fascism. Just as much as Hitler and Stalin – ardent boosters of cinematic propaganda – the National Government prioritized self-promotion by means of film, and arguably assigned it more importance because its cinema-going citizens could vote.⁷² The British government tried to control what appeared on screen – both features and newsreels –

⁶⁹ Low, *Films of Comment and Persuasion*, 9.

⁷⁰ Richards, *Age of the Dream Palace*.

⁷¹ Sedgwick, *A Choice of Pleasures*, 5.

⁷² Pronay, *Propaganda Politics, and Film*, 18.

through censorship. In 1912, the British film industry created the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC). By the interwar period, the BBFC had become even more stringent in its censorship, though not nearly as strict as censors in the totalitarian regimes of Europe. They were especially quick to clamp down on the appearance of sex, prostitution, immorality, perversions, disease, and political extremism (particularly Marxism). They were also highly sensitive to any issues that might tarnish the image of national symbols or heroes. Specifically, any form of criticism of the government, the monarchy, the civil service, or anything suggesting partisanship was banned.⁷³ Ross McKibbin argues that film censorship during the interwar years was almost entirely focused on maintaining the status quo and “de-politicising” the public sphere.⁷⁴ Local councils and British cinema-owners, who had no interest in being too controversial, reinforced these efforts. For their part, cinema-owners felt their main objective was to entertain moviegoers, not “show customers where they are wrong and put them right.”⁷⁵

Most British filmmaking companies, newsreel companies, and cinema proprietors were tied to the Conservative Party, limiting their willingness to protest censorship. Whatever the case, the films that appeared on screen in Britain during the 1930s were films the government wanted people to see. Similarly, newsreels had little interest in controversial topics and largely reinforced the status quo. Specifically, they focused their attention on the “ordinary” and “well-arranged” events in society, rather than the “sensational;” Pronay labels their approach to news “consensual.”⁷⁶ He also argues that

⁷³ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, 424.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ *Today's Cinema*, March 1, 1938.

⁷⁶ Pronay, “British Newsreels in the 1930s: 2. Their Policies and Impacts,” 67. Anthony Aldgate’s research on newsreel coverage of the Spanish Civil War and the findings of this dissertation support claims that newsreels were not controversial and rather acted as a consensus forging medium that was interested in advancing the interests of the state.

newsreels were generally monitored in their depiction of religion, politics, the military, justice, sex, social issues, crime, the monarchy, race, foreign relations, and “conflicts between the armed forces of a state and the populace.”⁷⁷

Airmindedness on the Screen, 1927-1939

With both the airplane and the cinema enjoying their so-called golden ages during the interwar period, it only made sense that the popularity of the airplane was wedded to the high interest in the cinema. Robert Wohl makes a fundamental point about studying airmindedness on the screen: the vast majority of people could only experience flight vicariously during the 1930s, through stories, newspapers, books, radio, and films. This makes the cinema extremely important in conceptualising how people came to understand the airplane.⁷⁸

As Michael Paris notes, the movie industry in both the United States and Europe quickly took advantage of the interest in the Lindbergh Atlantic crossing in 1927. Aviation became a vogue topic for movies, as airmail services, airliners, and airlines served as the setting for dozens of films between 1927 and 1939. Most of these films were American in origin, as the British film industry lacked the financing to produce lavish aviation films.⁷⁹ Especially during the first half of the 1930s, films such as *Night Flight* (1933), James Cagney’s *Ceiling Zero*, and *Central Airport* (1933), used the day-to-day operations of these fledging services to create atmospheres of suspense.⁸⁰ Robert

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Wohl, *The Spectacle of Flight*, 112.

⁷⁹ Paris, *From the Wright Brothers to Top Gun*, 75.

⁸⁰ In *Ceiling Zero* considerable time is spent looking at the modernity of an airline’s operations, the planes themselves, navigation tools, communications equipment, teletype machines, telephones, typewriters, and so on. Wohl, *Spectacle of Flight*, 137.

Wohl has labelled these “service films;” he argues that their exploration of aeronautics were especially popular amongst younger viewers.⁸¹ For example, the first-half of *Thirteen Hours by Air* (1936) was an exploration United Airlines’ operations; in *China Clipper* (1936), Pan Am received a similar treatment and in *Sky Giant* (1936), viewers were treated to an exposition of the training centre for TWA – all under the guise of some dramatic story. Some films merely focused on the wonder of flight, like *FPI* (1932), which chronicled fictitious floating platforms that were to be built in the Atlantic for refuelling stops. Other films such as *Sky Parade* (1936), *Flying Doctor* (1936), and *Non-Stop, New York* (1937) told more violent stories, whether it was crooks trying to crash a plane, a high-jacking, an adventure in the Outback, or a murder investigation above the clouds. By the end of the 1930s so many of these films had been produced that there were widespread concerns that the genre had been overdone. Still, young men went to aviation films in large numbers until the outbreak of the Second World War.⁸²

British companies also produced many aviation films. Typically, the Empire appeared on the screen as deliberate attempts by the GPO Film Unit, Imperial Airways, the Empire Marketing Board, or some other agency of the British government to promote the Empire in the UK and throughout the world.⁸³ Most of these pictures had similar common objectives: showcase Imperial Airways and how it could keep the Empire together; demonstrate the safety of air travel; demonstrate the technological mastery

⁸¹ Ibid., 134. *Night Flight*, directed by Clarence Brown (Los Angeles: MGM, 1933), *Central Airport*, directed by William A. Wellman (Los Angeles: Warner Bros., 1933).

⁸² Wohl, *The Spectacle of Flight*, 149. *Thirteen Hours by Air*, directed by Mitchell Leisen (Los Angeles: Paramount, 1933), *China Clipper*, directed by Ray Enright (Los Angeles: First National, 1936), *Sky Giant*, directed by Lew Landers (Los Angeles: RKO, 1936), *FPI Fails to Reply*, directed by Karl Hartl (Berlin: Universum, 1932), *Non-Stop, New York*, directed by Robert Stevenson (London: Gaumont British, 1937), and *Sky Parade*, directed by Otho Lovering (Los Angeles: Paramount, 1936), *Flying Doctor*, directed by Miles Mander (London: National Productions, 1936).

⁸³ Paris, *From the Wright Brothers to Top Gun*, 101.

Britain held over the people of the Empire; encourage nationalism; and connect airmindedness to British imperialism. Numerous films during the 1930s showed how the Empire continued to stretch across the globe through aviation. For example, *Air Outpost* (1937), directed by Paul Rotha, showed the importance of the Sharjah air outpost (on the Persian Gulf) not just to the local population, but Imperial Airways.⁸⁴

Other films, like *The Future's in the Air* (1937), demonstrated that aviation was revolutionizing communications in the Empire. Made with the full cooperation of Imperial Airways and written by novelist Graham Greene, the film examines how a letter could travel from the Australia Outback, across the jungles, mountains, and steppes of the Empire to arrive in England. The Rotha-produced film was careful to draw contrasts between the air delivery of mail and the ancient monuments like the Pyramids and Angkor Wat.⁸⁵ It ends with an ominous warning that taps the tone of British airmindedness during the interwar years: “have we conquered the air in the name of peace or war?”⁸⁶ According to the cinema, the airplane was also revolutionizing the so-called primitive areas of the Empire, particularly Africa and the Middle East. In films such as *Wings Over Africa* (1937), *Wings Over Empire* (1939), and *African Skyways* (1940) British technological mastery and symbols of it, like Imperial Airways, were said to be forming a “new Africa,” paving the way for “modern buildings and social

⁸⁴ Scott Anthony, “The Future's in the Air: Imperial Airways and the Documentary Film Movement,” *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 8 no. 3 (2011). *Air Outpost*, directed by Paul Rotha (London: Strand Films, 1937).

⁸⁵ *The Future's in the Air*, directed by Alexander Shaw (London: Strand Films, 1937), BFI 976142, 35mm. The 1934 film *Air Post* follows a similar pattern, though it is shorter and less elaborate. *Air Post*, directed by Geoffrey Clark (London: GPO Film Unit, 1934), BFI 35mm. It shows how Croydon Aerodrome acted as the centre of the Royal Mail's airmail service.

⁸⁶ *Saturday News Chronicle*, November 13, 1937. Both the *Saturday News Chronicle* and the *Observer* (November 14, 1937), gave the film favourable reviews, noting especially how it drew a contrast between ancient and contemporary forms of transportation.

services.”⁸⁷ Some films, like *Watch and Ward in the Air* (1937), showcased the masculinity and skill of British flying boat captains. Other films, like *Wings over Everest* (1934), were even more nationalistic in their aims.⁸⁸

Other cinematic manifestations of British aviation were less related to the Empire. Many films, especially in the 1920s, were simple explorations of how an airplane works, like *Aero Engine* (1933) or *Air Flow* (1937). Others often took the form of documentaries such as *Historic Flights* (1932) and *Conquest of the Air* (1936), one of the most notable British productions on airmindedness.⁸⁹ It was produced by Alexander Korda’s London Films (the production team for *Things to Come*) and written by John Monk Saunders (the writer of *Wings* and *The Dawn Patrol*). It presents an international history aviation to 1920, including Ancient, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and nineteenth-century attempts at flight. Thereafter it turns to a nationalistic celebration of Britain’s aeronautical achievements. It pays particular attention to commerce, transport, record-breaking flights, and air defence.⁹⁰ The film neatly encapsulates interwar British airmindedness. It attaches much hope to the airplane, saying how development in flight has made humanity’s limits “boundless.” Yet, it concludes with a stern warning about aerial warfare: “England is reluctantly compelled to divert the genius of her designers and

⁸⁷ *African Skyways*, directed by Donald Taylor (London: Strand Film Company, 1940). Imperial Airways, floundering under high costs and low passenger numbers, was particularly concerned with their public image during the interwar period. *Wings over Africa*, directed by Ladislao Vajda (London: Shepperton Studios, 1937), and *Wings over Empire* (London: Strand Films, 1939).

⁸⁸ Zander, “(Right) Wings over Everest,” *Watch and Ward in the Air*, directed by Ralph Keene (London: Strand Films, 1937), and *Wings over Everest*, directed by Geoffrey Barkas and Ivor Montagu (London: Gaumont British, 1934).

⁸⁹ *Aero Engine*, directed by Arthur Eton (London, 1933), *Air Flow*, directed by Arthur Eton (London: Strand Films, 1937), *Historic Flights* (London: 1932), and *Conquest of the Air*, directed by Alexander Esway, Zoltan Korda, John Monk Saunders, Alexander Shaw, and Donald Taylor (London: London Films, 1936).

⁹⁰ BFI Special Collections, London Film Productions Collections, *Conquest of the Air*, Zoltan Korda, Item A/016, Publicity Information.

the resources of her industries to modernizing her small but efficient air force,” and that “England is prepared for the time when action will follow.”⁹¹

Conclusion

Whether communist, fascist or liberal the nations of the West invariably saw aviation and the aviator as sites for the construction of masculinity, sources of national pride, measures of progress, and symbols modernity. At the same time, European countries also came to see the airplane as a potential destroyer of a world that was still rebounding from the effects of the First World War. Whatever the case may be, the airplane and its operator – whether male or female – occupied a place in the consciousness of European politicians, military leaders, and people that is difficult to comprehend in the twenty-first century. Great Britain was no exception; it was a country deeply fascinated by controlled flight and this interest manifested itself through keen attention to the exploits of British and American record-setting fliers and mass attendance at air shows. As the 1930s drew to a close, British views of the airplane had moved from fascination and hope to one of deep fear as Britons became deeply concerned with the destruction that the airplane – in their eyes – promised to bring in the event of a war that was becoming more likely as the 1930s closed. Indeed, as Le Corbusier had argued in his 1935 book *Aircraft*, the airplane had ceased to be an objection of popular fascination but one that had real and terrifying applications.

⁹¹ BFI Special Collections, London Film Productions Collections, Film Script (From August 1937), S6077. British reviews of the film were not favourable. The *Monthly Film Bulletin* felt the film was too clumsily, flippant, and comedic to actually be useful for its main purpose – fostering airmindedness amongst British cinemagoers. *Monthly Film Bulletin*, June 30, 1940.

**The First World War in the Air:
The Cinematic Flyer-Hero and the Great War on the Screen, 1927-1939**

“Ask him if he’ll drink a toast to the dead”

– Captain Courtney in *The Dawn Patrol* (1938)

Whether it is the zany Lord Flashheart in *Blackadder Goes Forth*, James Bigglesworth in the *Biggles* stories, or the characters in countless pulp fiction comics written during the interwar years, the First World War British flyer has a clearly established persona in British popular culture. Pilots were seen as playful, drunken, and jovial, while also being equally dutiful, stoic, lethal, and skilled. After 1927, Hollywood films created an image of the aviator and disseminated it to the point where, by the outbreak of the Second World War, it was accepted as the realistic portrayal of British Great War flyers. However, interwar cinema did not merely reproduce British and American propaganda distributed during the Great War, nor did it faithfully convey the realities of the air war. Instead, the aviator’s screen image fit traditional understandings of the hero, while infusing two particular interwar motifs: war-weariness and technological mastery. Additionally, drinking – a fundamental leisure activity in the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) and the RAF – was absent from wartime propaganda imagery of the aviator, but was firmly established by the cinema during the interwar period.

This chapter will first briefly consider the foundational role of the interwar years in the construction of British popular memories about the Great War. It will then provide an overview of First World War aviation films, a highly popular genre during the 1930s,

before focusing the discussion on two films: Howard Hughes's *Hell's Angels* and Edmund Goulding's *The Dawn Patrol*. The two films are regarded as the pinnacles of First World War aviation cinema. Specifically, it will examine the depiction of aviators, including their characterization, camaraderie, and cynicism. Second, it will explore the sensationalized portrayal of the airplane. Third, it will look at how the image of the flyer-hero was used to market the films to the British public. Finally, a sampling of British newspaper and trade reviews of the films will demonstrate how this image of the aviator was agreed upon as realistic and accurate. As a result of Hollywood films, the First World War aviator was established as a uniquely powerful warrior, who coped with the strain of combat through overt war-weariness and bouts of heavy drinking.

The Flyer-Hero and British Memories of the Great War

The historical antecedents of the Great War flyer-hero can be traced back to the Edwardian period and are rooted in the traditional image of the hero since the Romantic period. Since the *bildungsroman* (coming-of-age story) of the early nineteenth century, the defining elements of heroes have been their growing maturity, stoicism, and chivalry, which are then demonstrated by their ability to take risks and overcome them.⁹² By the outbreak of the First World War, the battle-forged soldier had become the epitome of the Western hero. In Britain, this was the “true Englishman,” an imperial soldier and adventurer like Sir Henry Havelock who was masculine, stoic, firm, and willing to give his life during the Indian Mutiny for the monarch and Empire, or the First World War

⁹² McCannon, *Red Arctic*, 100.

hero T. E. Lawrence, who was hugely popular during the 1930s.⁹³ Yet, Graham Dawson makes a fundamental point: while there may be constant elements to the Western hero, details on the smaller scale are always tailored to contemporary moods and political agendas.⁹⁴

Though aviators were getting considerable public attention before the war, the stereotypical image of the First World War flyer-hero did not emerge in the British public sphere until mid-1916. Britain, unlike Germany and France, had been reluctant to make heroes out of its aviators.⁹⁵ It was not until the disaster on the Somme and increasing image concerns (RFC difficulties in defending against Zeppelin raids and shockingly high RFC casualty rates) that the RFC decided to make heroes out of their individual aviators.⁹⁶ The RFC seemed to be a natural place to look for heroes, despite having a higher casualty rate than the infantry. Flying still allowed individual agency, or at least the semblance of it, something that by the Battle of the Somme the infantryman had been stripped of.⁹⁷ Simultaneously, the decidedly un-heroic poems of servicemen like Siegfried Sassoon, along with more realistic and graphic portrayals of British life in the trenches, started to appear in British print.⁹⁸

⁹³ Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire, and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1, 171 & 233.

⁹⁴ Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, 235.

⁹⁵ Germany was the first country to make celebrities of its flyers and France was the first to adopt the ace system. Germany's exploitation of them is well documented. See Fritzsche, *A Nation of Fliers* and Wohl, *A Passion for Wings*. In fact, Michael Paris points out that RFC pilots were so uninteresting to boys' literature in the first two years of the war that war-time writers actually reverted to their pre-war tales of espionage. Michael Paris, "Boys Books and the Great War," *History Today* 50 no. 11 (2000), 49.

⁹⁶ Michael Paris, *Over the Top: The Great War and Juvenile Literature in Britain* (London: Praeger, 2004), 61.

⁹⁷ Linda Robertson, *The Dream of Civilized Warfare: World War I Flying Aces and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 209-213.

⁹⁸ Susan Kent, *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Interwar Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 49.

Britain's first celebrity flyers started to receive public attention in the summer and fall of 1916; initially their successes were mentioned in the House of Commons or their feats leaked to the press.⁹⁹ Flyers such as Albert Ball, James McCudden, and Mick Mannock soon became darlings of the British press and developed "cult-like" followings.¹⁰⁰ They also appeared more heroic in British literature from the works of aviatrix Hilda Beatrice Hewlett (*Our Flying Men*) or Henry Newbolt, who called them the "knights of the air" in his *Tales of the Great War*.¹⁰¹ Boys' papers such as *Chums* published recruitment material for the RFC and willingly ignored the dangerous realities of the air war. Some RFC aces such as McCudden also contributed to this by publishing memoirs that glorified the service.¹⁰² The British movie industry aided in the heroic presentation of the flyer, by releasing films such as *The Eyes of the Army* in early 1916. In the end, the flyer proved to be the hero the British press was looking for; they gave the war a positive spin while conveniently avoiding the realities of the trenches.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Robertson, *The Dream of Civilized Warfare*, 95 & 161.

¹⁰⁰ Van Riper, *Imaging Flight*, 36.

¹⁰¹ Goldstein, *The Flying Machine and Modern Literature*, 91, Henry Newbolt, *Tales of the Great War* (London: Longman's Green, 1916), 248-249, Paris, "The Rise of the Airmen." Newbolt is often cited as the instigator of this idea of the "knights of the air." Robertson, *The Dream of Civilized Warfare*, 157-163. The British Government used not just the ideals of the medieval knight – honour, duty, chivalry, and courage – but also their participation in crusades to try to encourage conscription. Goldstein, *The Flying Machine and Modern Literature*, 87. The idea of a crusade fit well with the broader British propaganda effort during the Great War. It focused on depicting the German "Hun" as barbaric, savage, and ruthless.

¹⁰² Paris, *Over the Top*, 68

¹⁰³ Paris, *Over the Top*, 56, Goldstein, *The Flying Machine and Modern Literature*, 88, and van Riper, *Imaging Flight*, 41. The idea of the knight was not unique to Britain; the autobiographies of famous aviators like McCudden, Max Immelmann, and Manfred von Richthofen tapped the memory of the knight. Robertson, *The Dream of Civilized Warfare*, 97-104. The contrast between fighting the war in the air and on the ground could be found throughout wartime literature and has been reused in postwar literature, cinema, and art. See Wohl, *A Passion for Wings*, Goldstein, *The Flying Machine and Modern Literature*, 79 & 88. Prime Minister David Lloyd George was amongst the most enthusiastic upholders of the idea of the flyer-hero, once declaring "high above the squalor and the mud they fight out the eternal issue of right and wrong." van Riper, *Imaging Flight*, 79-86.

As Linda Robertson argues, the public image of the stoic, patriotic, dutiful, and skilled flyer-hero became one of the RFC's greatest contributions to the war effort.¹⁰⁴ Conveniently, however, British propaganda imagery glossed over or ignored the rowdier elements of RFC pilots – the customary tomfoolery and drinking, sometimes even before missions. Additionally, these propaganda images were becoming dominant right when the nature of the air war was changing; aerial combat had ceased to be a duel between individuals and was becoming a rigidly choreographed engagement between formations. It was in the British propagandizing of pilots – modelled on the French, German, and American methods – that the stoicism and strength of the flyer-hero was entrenched in British popular culture.

The interwar years were uniquely important in British constructions of its national and personal memories of the First World War. The dominant narrative, exemplified by the work of Paul Fussell and Samuel Hynes, argues that the trauma of the Great War created a lack of a demand for war-stories for most of the 1920s, but also a literary and cultural schism between the prewar and interwar periods.¹⁰⁵ This changed in 1928 when, according to Fussell and Hynes, literary interest in the war rose dramatically. It was during this “boom” period that some of the now “canonical” accounts of the war were published: Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That*, Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth* and, of course, Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Robertson, *The Dream of Civilized Warfare*, 87 & 98

¹⁰⁵ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (London: The Bodley Head, 1990) and Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

¹⁰⁶ Janet S. K. Watson, *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory, and the First World War in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 188-195. Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925* (London: Virago Press, 1933), Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (London: Cassell, 1957), Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (London: Little,

More recently, historians such as Michael Paris, Jay Winter, and Jonathan Vance have contested the arguments put forward by Fussell and Hynes.¹⁰⁷ Paris argues that Hynes and Fussell's focus on the poetry and novels of Britain's elite has distorted the memory of the war in contemporary accounts, making it appear more disillusioned than were the actual popular feelings of the 1920s and the 1930s. He contends that interest in the war can be traced to well before the 1928-1930 literary boom. This can be corroborated by the surge of traditional commemoration immediately after the war chronicled by Jay Winter. Also important, Jonathan Vance has emphasized that all cultural artefacts, like the cinema, must be considered of value when evaluating the memories of the Great War.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, other historians such as Karel Dibbets, Modris Eksteins, Bert Hogenkamp, Pierre Sorlin, David Williams, along with Winter, have argued for cinema's fundamental importance in the shaping of opinions, the construction of myths, and the forging of memories about the Great War.¹⁰⁹ Echoing these points, Paris argues that it is the unrivalled popularity of the cinema that makes it "such a valuable reflection of popular opinion;" or, for our purposes, popular memory.¹¹⁰

Brown & Company, 1929), Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (London: Faber & Faber, 1931). For more see Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Toronto: Lester, Orpen & Dennys, 1989), and Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*.

¹⁰⁷ Michael Paris, "Boys Books and the Great War," Michael Paris, *Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture 1850-2000* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory Sites of Mourning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Watson argues that because pacifist works became so popular with the British public during the 1930s, they too became extremely popular with scholars (Fussell and Eksteins are examples), homogenising the public discourse around anti-war commemoration and ignoring other reactions.

¹⁰⁸ Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning and the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 3-11.

¹⁰⁹ Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, Karel Dibbets and Bert Hogenkamp, eds., *Film and the First World War* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995), Pierre Sorlin, "Cinema and the Memory of the Great War," in *The First World War and Popular Cinema*, ed. Michael Paris (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), Modris Eksteins, "The Cultural Impact of the Great War," in *The First World War and Popular Cinema*, ed. Michael Paris.

¹¹⁰ Michael Paris, "Enduring Heroes: British Feature Films and the First World War, 1919-1997," in *The First World War and Popular Cinema*, ed. Michael Paris, 53. For example, Fussell does not discuss the film version of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, despite its importance to the construction of interwar (and

Directly related to this chapter, Dominick Pisano has argued film's central importance in the construction of popular memories of the Great War in the air, specifically highlighting that cinematic stereotypes are what "persist in the popular memory."¹¹¹

Paris convincingly argues that British interwar popular culture – specifically youth culture – was inundated with images of the Great War that presented the conflict as horrible and violent, but also glorious, romantic, and worthwhile.¹¹² As early as 1918, boys' periodicals such as *Chums* and *Boys Own Paper* published articles written by ex-servicemen that made the war appear to be an adventure.¹¹³ Here, Paris asserts, is a continuation of the warrior culture forged during the nineteenth century by the likes of H. Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling, and Edgar Wallace; there was no schism between British culture before and after the war, nor does it imply a previous lack of interest in the war before 1928. To Paris, this also represents a deliberate effort by the writers and editors of these collections to gloss over the grim realities of the Great War (including air war) and focus on the heroism and justification.¹¹⁴

During the interwar years, the flyer-hero supplemented the Victorian and Edwardian imperial adventurer and the newly added Great War soldier.¹¹⁵ The new flyer-hero maintained many past heroic virtues like duty, honour, and stoicism, while his

beyond) notions of the Great War. *All Quiet on the Western Front*, directed by Lewis Milestone (Los Angeles: Universal, 1930). Williams, *Media, Memory and the First World War*, 31. Sorlin also points to the importance of *All Quiet* in shaping both the memory of the Great War and the history of the cinema. Sorlin, "Cinema and the Memory of the Great War," 13-22.

¹¹¹ Dominick A. Pisano, "Constructing the Memory of Aerial Combat in World War I," in *Legend, Memory, and the Great War in the Air*, eds. Dominick A. Pisano, Thomas J. Dietz, Joanne M. Greenstein, and Karl S. Schneide (Washington: Smithsonian, 1992), 13.

¹¹² Paris, *Warrior Nation*, 154, and "Boys Books and the Great War," 49.

¹¹³ Paris, *Warrior Nation*, 147 & 156.

¹¹⁴ Paris, "Boys Books and the Great War," 49.

¹¹⁵ Francis, *The Flyer*, 14.

patriotism and nationalism had been blunted by the war.¹¹⁶ As Martin Francis notes, this hero was infused with the ability to lethally manipulate the most modern technology. As the RAF became the elite service unit (both in its own eyes and the eyes of the British public), the flyer also became the elite fictional warrior in the British vernacular. The public image of the aviator in Britain did not just represent their elite warrior status, but also their reputation as drinkers, playboys, and partiers.¹¹⁷ Boys' papers such as *Chums* were particularly interested in the adventures of RFC pilots.¹¹⁸ No other aviator personified this new flyer-hero better than Captain W. E. Johns's adventurous character Biggles. Johns was always careful to ensure his readers saw the barbarity of war, but as Paris notes, Biggles is always engaged in a cause worth dying for.¹¹⁹ The heroic, yet tragic, flyer-hero was exactly the type of Great War aviator that could be found on screen between 1927 and 1939.

First World War films in the Age of Talking Pictures

Much of Britain's heroic understanding of warfare during the interwar years was imported from Hollywood.¹²⁰ Film was an important medium in the construction of myths and memories about the Great War from the outbreak of hostilities.¹²¹ It became the leisure activity of children in Great Britain during the 1930s – the very same children who read periodicals such as *Boys Own Papers* or *Chums*. In Britain and the United

¹¹⁶ Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, 171 & 233, McCannon, *Red Arctic*, 100, and Paris, *Warrior Nation*, 167.

¹¹⁷ Paris, "The Rise of the Airmen," 123, and Francis, *The Flyer*, 14-17.

¹¹⁸ Paris, "Boys Books and the Great War," 49. Other flying stories often included spy adventures.

¹¹⁹ Biggles was often political. His adventures in the Middle East were clearly inspired by Lawrence of Arabia, and British policing of the Middle East using aircraft. His accidental involvement in the Spanish Civil War found him sympathising with the Republicans. Paris, *Warrior Nation*, 174.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 160-163.

¹²¹ Paris, *From the Wright Brothers to Top Gun*, 34. The war also advanced cinema techniques, from handheld cameras to telephoto lens. Both innovations made the war films of the 1920s and 1930s possible.

States fifty films about the war were made between 1914 and 1918. Immediately after the armistice, the first film of the Great War in the air was made: *A Romance of the Air*.¹²² However, it was not until the mid-1920s that films about the Great War were produced in large numbers. Despite societal pressure to know what the war had been like, filmmakers felt it was too soon to make films about the war. Specifically, studio interest in First World War films lapsed until *The Big Parade* (1925) and a film version of the play *What Price Glory* (1926), both telling the story of American soldiers fighting in France.¹²³ Both of these films were well received, demonstrating to Hollywood executives that films depicting the First World War could be commercially successful.¹²⁴

It is not surprising that at least twenty-six films about the First World War in the air were produced between *Wings* in 1927 and the release of the second version of *The Dawn Patrol* in the United Kingdom in early 1939.¹²⁵ As noted in chapter three, air-mindedness in Great Britain remained high and First World War aviation films had the perfect mix to attract viewers. The action, tempo, and romance could appeal to the working classes, while the historical content and social commentary attracted the middle classes.¹²⁶ Coupled with star power and marketed with a highly sophisticated publicity campaign, they had the potential to appeal across class, age, and gender lines.

Despite the large number of First World War aviation films, this chapter will focus on *Hell's Angels* and *The Dawn Patrol* (1938 version), with briefer references to other pictures. *Hell's Angels* and *The Dawn Patrol* are two parts of the trilogy of First

¹²² Ibid., 33.

¹²³ John Whiteclay Chambers, "The Movies and the Anti-war Debate in America, 1930-1941," *Film and History* 36, no. 1: 413 and Paris, "Wings," 11.

¹²⁴ Rudy Behlmer, "World War I Aviation Films," *Films in Review*, August-September 1967, 414.

¹²⁵ *The Kinematograph Year Book: 1940* (London: Kinematograph Weekly), 1940.

¹²⁶ Richards, *Age of the Dream Palace*, 12-24.

World War flying films (*Wings* being the first) that Michael Paris sees as the most expensive, best made, most well-received, most popular, and most culturally significant; all others were mere “imitations.”¹²⁷ Both films were American-made, but depict British aviators, something that was, considering Hollywood’s love for British characters and stories, surprisingly rare during the period; the other films were *Body and Soul* (1931), *The Eagle and the Hawk* (1933), and *Lilac Time* (1938).¹²⁸

For all intents and purposes, *Wings* set the tone for First World War aviation films in the 1930s. Despite its weak plot, it was hugely successful with both audiences and critics.¹²⁹ That the film was released a mere three months after Charles Lindbergh’s historic flight made its success almost a foregone conclusion.¹³⁰ One of its key selling points was its claim to have realistically captured the Great War in the air, or so it persuaded critics and audiences. *Wings* benefitted not only from excellent production values, which included pioneering aviation camerawork by Harry Perry, but also from the real First World War flying experiences of both the director, William Wellman, and the writer, John Monk Saunders. Saunders counted himself among the “lost generation” of First World War veterans and felt that the screen was really the only way to convey the air war.¹³¹ He would go on to write *The Dawn Patrol* as well. The film also obtained

¹²⁷ Michael Paris, “Wings” in *The Movies as History: Visions of the Twentieth Century*. David Ellwood, ed. (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2000), 11-15.

¹²⁸ Glancy, *When Hollywood Loved Britain*. *Body and Soul*, directed by Alfred Santell (Los Angeles: Fox, 1931), *The Eagle and the Hawk*, directed by Stuart Walker (Los Angeles: Paramount, 1933), *Lilac Time*, directed by George Fitzmaurice (Los Angeles: First National Pictures, 1928).

¹²⁹ Skogsberg, *Wings on the Screen*, 2. *Wings*, directed by William A. Wellman (Los Angeles: Paramount, 1927).

¹³⁰ Paris, “Wings,” 14.

¹³¹ Wohl, *Spectacle of Flight*, 116 and Farmer, *Celluloid Wings*, 26. The film also obtained the official collaboration of the US War Department, who saw the film as an excellent propaganda opportunity.

official cooperation from the US War Department, which saw it as an excellent propaganda opportunity.¹³²

Wings established the cinematic practice of exploiting the flyer-hero image that had been constructed in the British and American propaganda over the course of the war: the heroic pilot, who, unlike the men in the trenches, had mastered technology and fought the war with agency, individuality, and if successful, celebrity.¹³³ It also established the common tropes of the fraternity amongst aviators and the concept of the martyred pilot.¹³⁴ More important, at least for Hollywood executives, *Wings* showed that the flying ace simply made for good and profitable cinema.¹³⁵

Remarkably, the only British-made film depicting the Royal Flying Corps' war effort produced during the interwar period was the 1923 film *Reverse of the Medal*, which was "under-financed and poorly made."¹³⁶ This is surprising given the level of interest in the airplane both during and after the war. What made this absence even more peculiar is the RFC's use of the cinema to promote their exploits during the war, and British film studios, most notably British Instructional Films, releasing stories of the British military's wartime heroics throughout the 1920s. This situation was due not to a lack of British interest in cinematic depictions of their aviator's exploits, but to the poor state of affairs in the British film industry. British cinematic efforts, as they related to aviation, were focused mostly on the Empire and air defence. As a result, depictions of RFC pilots were left to American film studios, and American-made films that were meant

¹³² Wellman served in the Lafayette Flying Corps.

¹³³ Paris, "Wings," 10 and Wohl, *Spectacle of Flight*, 113-117.

¹³⁴ Paris, "Wings," 14 and Wohl, *Spectacle of Flight*, 121. Again, as Robertson argues, this image of the ace actually had little to do with the real ace during the war.

¹³⁵ Paris, "Wings," 17.

¹³⁶ Paris, *From the Wright Brothers to Top Gun*, 42.

to portray the RFC often used American actors playing British aviators.¹³⁷ This created a situation in which, despite their relatively small contribution to the war effort, American combat pilots were over-represented in English-language cinema. Most films such as *Captain Swagger* (1928), *Ace of Aces* (1933), *Today We Live* (1933), *Hell in the Heavens* (1934) and, of course, *Wings* featured American aviators.¹³⁸ Therefore, films such as *Hell's Angels* and *The Dawn Patrol* were especially important in the construction of the image of the aviator and the airplane in the British public sphere because they depicted British or allegedly British flyers. Their production values also make them good cases for study.

Hell's Angels, with its huge production costs, celebrity proprietor, revolutionary aerial sequences, and well-publicized opening was – more so than *Wings* – responsible for starting an onslaught of films depicting the First World War in the air. In fact, thirteen of the twenty-six films were released within five years of the premiere of *Hell's Angels*. One film, *The Skyhawk* (1929), largely copied *Hell's Angels'* story and was rushed into production so it could be released first. At least eight others, including *Cock of the Air* (1932), *Sky Devils* (1932), and *Hell in the Heavens*, borrowed heavily from

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ *Ace of Aces*, directed by J. Walter Reuben (Los Angeles: RKO, 1933), was also based on a John Monk Saunders story – *Bird of Prey*. It tells the story of an American sculptor, Rocky, who initially refuses to go and fight in the war. However, he is labelled a coward by his fiancé and decides to fight. Once in the cockpit over France, he becomes a ruthless lone wolf who takes pride in his kills. It is through Rocky's transformation that the film explores (albeit clumsily) the impact that war can have on combatants. *Monthly Film Bulletin* 46 no. 551 (December 1979). Like other pictures in the period, *Captain Swagger* directed by Edward H. Griffith (Los Angeles: Pathé, 1928) begins as an American aviator is ending his time on the Western Front. The rest of the film is his time spent as a demobilized bandit. It essentially only uses the initial air war to get people into the cinema. *The Bioscope*, January 16, 1929. *Hell in the Heavens*, directed by John Blystone (Los Angeles: Fox, 1934), like so many First World War aviation pictures was an entirely unoriginal story about a war-weary pilot. *Today We Live*, directed by Howard Hawks (Los Angeles: MGM, 1933), features two American aviators (one played by Gary Cooper) in love with an ambulance worker. *Kinematograph Weekly*, May 18, 1933. For the most part, British periodicals cite the critical points of appeal for these films as being the subject matter (First World War drama), aerial thrills or, less frequently, the star power.

Hell's Angels' story and actually used aerial photography from the thousands of feet of discarded film from *Hell's Angels*.¹³⁹ Similarly, many of these films copied its story or scenes to the point that by 1934, interest in First World War aviation films, both in the United States and Great Britain, had started to wane. It also set the standard for First World War aviation films during the interwar period. Similarly, *The Dawn Patrol* is generally considered to be strongest First World War aviation film in production values, writing, and acting; it most effectively explores both the horrors of the war in the air and pilot persona.¹⁴⁰ As such, these two films act as effective bookends to a period that saw nearly thirty First World War aviation films produced. In summary, the quality, popularity and content of the two films make them the most worthy case studies.

The Plots and Players of *Hell's Angels* and *The Dawn Patrol*

Hell's Angels was a film made like no other during the interwar years. Howard Hughes, its proprietor and eventual director, shaped it almost entirely. The wealthy Hughes had long been an aviation enthusiast, like so many others in the 1920s.¹⁴¹ Allegedly, he watched *Wings* repeatedly and decided to make a better aviation film. Though he initially tried to work with director Marshall Nielan, the film quickly became

¹³⁹ Behlmer, "World War I Aviation Films," 413 and Farmer, *Celluloid Wings*, 40. Each of these films featured Hughes's name in their promotion material, immediately connecting them to *Hell's Angels*. For example, they would state "Howard Hughes Presents: Cock of the Air." *Cock of the Air*, directed by Tom Buckingham (Los Angeles: United Artists, 1932), was very weak on plot, but British cinema reviewers were highly impressed with its aerial sequences, not mentioning that they were actually shot for *Hell's Angels*. *Sky Devils*, directed by A. Edward Sutherland (Los Angeles: RKO, 1932).

¹⁴⁰ Jeffrey Richards, Rudy Behlmer, and Michael Paris agree on this point.

¹⁴¹ Farmer, *Celluloid Wings*, 49. It was actually during the filming of *Hell's Angels* that Hughes earned his pilot's licence. Only five years later he would be breaking ground-speed records, cross-continent records in 1936, and making a celebrated flight around the world in 1938. Michael Drosnin, *Citizen Hughes* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985).

his “personal project.”¹⁴² By the time shooting had wrapped, Hughes’s private air fleet had flown over 227,000 miles, three pilots had died, and over two million feet of film had been shot, only a small fraction of which was used in the final cut. Hughes actually re-shot the scenes with dialogue in 1929, after the development and instant popularity of talking pictures. The final cost of the film was an astronomical four million US dollars, much of it caused by the elaborate and extremely expensive flying sequences; it was the most expensive film made until *Gone With the Wind* (1939).¹⁴³

Hell’s Angels’ plot is simple. It tells the story of two brothers, Roy (James Hall) and Monte (Ben Lyon), who are attending Oxford with their German friend Karl (John Darrow), before the outbreak of the First World War. Once the war begins, Roy dutifully joins the RFC, while his less enthusiastic brother is tricked into the service. While in the RFC, they become embroiled in a love triangle with Helen (Jean Harlow). They participate in the successful interception of a German Zeppelin (naturally Karl is part of its crew) but are eventually shot down in a daring bombing raid. At the end of the film, Roy is forced to kill Monte to protect information about an upcoming Allied offensive.

The Dawn Patrol, directed by Edmund Goulding, while less grandiose than *Hell’s Angels*, was likely the most significant First World War aerial drama produced during the interwar period. It was an improvement upon Howard Hawks’s 1930 version of the film with the same name, itself derived from a John Monk Saunders story.¹⁴⁴ Most of the film’s plot remained the same (the aerial sequences are actually the same footage as the

¹⁴² Farmer, *Celluloid Wings*, 45-48. The film’s title, *Hell’s Angels*, was actually Nielan’s idea. He did not last long on the film, nor did his successors Luther Reed and James Whale. Paris, *From the Wright Brothers to Top Gun and Special Souvenir Number, Gaumont-British Pictorial: Hell’s Angels*. Ben Lyon, one of the lead actors in the film, also actually learned to fly his own plane during the course of filming and according to the promotional was considered an expert aviator.

¹⁴³ Farmer, *Celluloid Wings*, 48.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 57. *The Dawn Patrol*, directed by Howard Hawks (Los Angeles: First National Pictures, 1930).

1930 version); Goulding improved large portions of the dialogue. It begins during the “Fokker Scourge” period of 1915, when RFC casualties were worst. The film tells the story of the fictitious 59th Squadron’s struggles with the dangers of aerial warfare, inexperienced pilots, poor morale, and superior German aviators, led by the notorious von Richter, likely a fictionalized version of the Red Baron. It pits two flyboys, Courtney (Errol Flynn) and his best friend Scott (David Niven), against their more formal and stress-ridden commanding officer Major Brand (Basil Rathbone). Brand is cracking under the strain of sending British pilots to their death against the Germans. Eventually an unauthorized raid by Courtney and Scott unwittingly leads to Brand’s promotion from the squadron. He chooses Courtney as his replacement. In his new role Courtney is forced to send Scott’s brother into combat and to his death. Ultimately, as penance for the death of Scott’s brother, Courtney is killed during a dangerous solo mission at the end of the film.

The aviator presented in both *Hell’s Angels* and *The Dawn Patrol* is a familiar figure: the stereotypical flyer-hero, created during the Great War and descended from generations of Western heroes. He enjoys drink, is rowdy, but is dutiful, stoic, chivalrous, a master of technology, and a lethal warrior. The aviator was also an exceptional human being; unique in his ability not only to fight and win the war on his own, but also possessing the skill needed to fly an airplane in combat and survive.¹⁴⁵ However, the depiction of the flyer in the both films is more complicated than mere glorification of the aviator. In the case of *Hell’s Angels*, the stereotypical pilot does not exist in either of the film’s two lead characters – only in a combination of their

¹⁴⁵ Corn, *Winged Gospel*, 75.

personalities. In *The Dawn Patrol*, such pilots do exist; however they are altered to suit the war-weary tone of the film and their own psychological demons.

Regarding *Hell's Angels*, there appears to be a certain level of ambiguity at best, or misunderstanding at worst, as to the nationalities of the two lead characters in the film. Skogsberg and Farmer both refer to Roy and Monte as two "American brothers" who enlisted in the RFC.¹⁴⁶ However, a closer examination of Roy and Monte's dress, speech, and discussions of England and nationalism (specifically with Karl in Germany at the start of the war) leaves little doubt of their Englishness, despite the actors' accents.¹⁴⁷ This discrepancy between the characters and their voices can be accounted for by the fact the film was originally meant to be silent, in which case their accents would not have mattered. This aside, *Hell's Angels* provides a mixed depiction of the aviator, certainly different than the standard interwar take on the aviator, as neither Roy nor Monte fully embodies the pilot persona. Yet, between the two brothers all elements of the stereotypical First World War British aviator are present. Monte, the more carefree and personable of the two brothers, exemplifies many of the common playboy flyer attributes: he is fun-loving, drinks heavily, and is a womanizer. But, he is a coward. Roy, on the contrary, is dutiful, nationalistic, violent, and a highly skilled pilot. Ultimately, he proves his dedication to the war effort by killing his own brother to protect information about an upcoming offensive.

In contrast to *Hell's Angels*, the aviators portrayed in *The Dawn Patrol* perfectly fit the stereotype of the pilot during the interwar period. Most of the film's notions of the

¹⁴⁶ Farmer, *Celluloid Wings*, 49 and Skogsberg, *Wings on the Screen*, 8.

¹⁴⁷ *Hell's Angels*, 3 minutes. Karl makes references to "my country" reminding Roy "I keep forgetting you're not English." The casting of the brother's German friend Karl also reinforces this point. Karl is played an American (John Darrow), who makes no effort whatsoever to speak German, let alone mimic a German accent.

pilot are conveyed through its four major characters: Squadron Commander Brand, his adjutant Phipps (Donald Crisp), and pilots Scott and Captain Courtney. The hairstyles and posh accents of Courtney, Scott, and Brand all convey a sense of elitism, even though Flynn was Australian. While this does largely reflect the composition of the RFC during the First World War, it may overstate, or at least reinforce those norms. Each character possesses unique attributes that either contribute to the flyer persona during the 1930s or the views of war presented in the film. Brand and Phipps have been hardened by the war and stoically carry out their duties, despite clear signs that sending fellow flyers to their death is sapping Brand's strength.

David Niven's character in the film, Scott, is less complex than that of Courtney, though he does embody particular elements of the flyer-hero archetype. Niven actually said it was one of his favourite roles, so much that it prompted him to try to join the RAF at the outbreak of the Second World War.¹⁴⁸ Niven commented that the all-male atmosphere on the set made things feel like a "stag party."¹⁴⁹ This on-set atmosphere also shines through in the film itself. Niven, knowingly or not, was drawing a connection between the rowdy atmosphere on the set and the rowdy atmosphere in the mess hall. Returning to the character Niven plays, Scott embodies the interwar and contemporary notions of the flyboy. His excessive drinking while sporting polka-dot pyjamas over his uniform introduces the viewer to the fun-loving elements of his character very early in the film. This is furthered by Courtney's reminiscences of him waving as he was (presumably) falling to his death and his drunken and unexpected return. Though Scott is

¹⁴⁸ David Niven, "The Role I liked Best," *The Saturday Evening Post*, May 3, 1947. Niven explains his excitement about the role in the article stating that his "enthusiasm never dulled" despite the hard work and the heat from wearing wool coats in the California sun.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

playful, he is serious about his work as a flyer and is quite good at it. He proves himself to be a capable combat aviator, rescuing Courtney when he is shot down. His skill, and understanding of the brutalities of the war, are also demonstrated when his brother Donny arrives at the squadron. Scott pleads with Courtney (who at that point in the film is commanding the squadron) not to send his brother up before he has a chance to teach him some combat manoeuvres: “they’ll slaughter him!”¹⁵⁰ Of course, Donny is killed on his first mission, completely expelling any traces of the flyboy personality from Scott, leaving only the warrior. This, along with his initial reaction when Donny first arrives, exposes the hidden fatalism that Scott’s bombastic manner hides.

Captain Courtney is the film’s most important character. Flynn, Warner Bros.’s biggest star, was “enormously popular” during the late 1930s, stemming roles in hits such as *Captain Blood* (1935), *Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936), and *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938).¹⁵¹ Flynn portrays Courtney as the quintessential interwar flyer-hero. The first image of an aviator in the film is Flynn at the controls of his Sopwith Camel, wearing a helmet, goggles, his face dirtied from the oil of his engine. This classic image of a First World War aviator would have already been familiar to cinemagoers from earlier First World War aviation pictures and the marketing campaign for *The Dawn Patrol*. Courtney demonstrates his skills on numerous occasions: downing numerous enemies and singlehandedly conducting daring raids on an airfield and a munitions depot. Captain Courtney proves to be just as effective as a partier as he is a flyer. In numerous scenes, he drinks heavily and is seen to be very intoxicated. Like his comrades, Courtney enjoys singing in the mess, sharing humorous anecdotes about comrades, playing tricks

¹⁵⁰ *The Dawn Patrol*, 66 minutes.

¹⁵¹ Skogsberg, *Wings on the Screen*, 23.

on other pilots, and engaging in all sorts of mischief. From the film's first scene, Courtney is established as the archetypal First World War aviator.



Illustration 1: Errol Flynn as Captain Courtney

Like other films of the period such as *Eagle and the Hawk* and *Ace of Aces*, much of the pilot persona is established in the boisterous and loud mess halls. The mess in *Hell's Angels* fits this image perfectly; the pilots sing, drink, trade insults, and share anecdotes as they eat in a noisy mess hall. It is in *The Dawn Patrol* that the mess is used to greatest effect. Indeed, the largest portion of the film takes place in the mess. As in *Ace of Aces*, the mess in *The Dawn Patrol* is decorated with wreckage from (presumably downed) German airplanes, the tables are old barrels and pieces of wood, and a sign on

the wall reads “the binge patrol.”¹⁵² The mess atmosphere is even more boisterous than in *Hell’s Angels*, and drink is immediately established as the preferred recreational activity: all of the pilots (with the exception of one who is mourning the loss of his friend) are singing “hurrah for the next man that dies!” as they drink.¹⁵³ Again, singing in the officer’s mess is common to the films in the period. Also common is the especially important mess practice of escaping the horrors of war by drinking, sharing anecdotes about deceased comrades or reading the newspaper.¹⁵⁴ *The Dawn Patrol* only builds on the cinematic precedent of the 1930s that shows First World War aviators adopting a flippant attitude towards their comrades in order to mask their fears and emotions.

Brothers in Arms: Pilot Camaraderie on the Screen

In each of the films, as well as other First World War aviation pictures of the interwar period, pilot behaviour in the mess halls depicts the camaraderie between the aviators. This camaraderie is also displayed in various other scenes in both *Hell’s Angels* and *The Dawn Patrol*. Not only does it remind the viewer of the sense of brotherhood between the pilots, but it also serves to reinforce interwar notions of the flyer-playboy, and the stoic warrior. *Hell’s Angels* and more so *The Dawn Patrol*, show that pilot camaraderie transcended both generations and nationalities. Pilot camaraderie is less

¹⁵² *The Dawn Patrol*, 12 minutes and *Ace of Aces*, 12 Minutes. The mess in *Ace of Aces* is adorned cartoons, airplane wreckage and empty liquor bottles.

¹⁵³ *The Dawn Patrol*, 12 minutes. It should be noted that Major Brand, the men’s squadron leader is also drinking. However, he is sipping sherry in his office, while writing a letter to the recently killed pilot’s widow.

¹⁵⁴ Even the anecdotes shared help construct pilots as rowdy flyboys. This practice is also on display in other films in the period, like *Hell’s Angels*, *Ace of Aces*, *The Eagle and the Hawk*, and *Cock of the Air*. In *Ace of Aces*, the pilots refer to their fallen comrades as “here today, hero tomorrow.” Additionally, the pilots take nicknames like Dracula and Tombstone Terry; they welcome new members of the squadron with the greeting “welcome to the ranks of the un-dead.” *Ace of Aces*, 15 minutes. The *Hollywood Spectator* actually complained about the amount of alcohol consumption in their review of *The Eagle and the Hawk*. *Hollywood Spectator*, June 24, 1933.

overt in *Hell's Angels* than in *The Dawn Patrol*, largely due to the story's emphasis on the relationship between the two brothers, and their love interest, rather than the relationships in the squadron.

Unlike in *Hell's Angels*, camaraderie is one of the dominant themes of *The Dawn Patrol*. The paternalistic nature of the camaraderie between aviators can be seen in how the veteran pilots treat the often very young replacement pilots in *The Dawn Patrol*.¹⁵⁵ Courtney makes a concerted effort to greet the enthusiastic replacement pilots with respect, asking them how many hours solo they have had before telling them to get ready to go up. Further, as the replacements stand at attention or try to salute, Courtney tells them: "stand at ease, we don't have any formality here."¹⁵⁶ However, at no point in the film do the replacement pilots (whose arrival is always announced by men singing in an automobile as it pulls up to the headquarters) drink with the senior flyers.¹⁵⁷

The fraternity between pilots also has a darker side to it, which is clearly demonstrated in two scenes. First, a German airplane circles the 59th Squadron's base before dropping a pair of boots with a note attached telling British pilots that they will be safer on the ground. Naturally, this elicits a vociferous response from the airmen, who try to rush to their planes before being ordered by Brand not to fall into the German trap: "don't worry, you'll die soon enough!" True to form, Courtney and Scott ignore Brand's orders and return the boots to the German airfield.¹⁵⁸ The rebellious aviator would have

¹⁵⁵ Youthful replacement pilots feature in a number of different films in the 1930s.

¹⁵⁶ *The Dawn patrol*, 23 minutes. The pilots give varying responses regarding how many solo hours they have had before joining the squadron, the lowest of which is 7.5 hours. This introduces a theme that runs throughout the film, poorly trained and inexperienced young men being thrown into combat against a vastly superior enemy.

¹⁵⁷ This segregation is remarkably accurate. Separation in mess halls was common practice in the RFC during the First World War.

¹⁵⁸ *The Dawn Patrol*, 52 minutes. This scene is very similar to one in 1935's *Hell in the Heavens* when "The Baron," the "most desperate and dangerous of German aces" drops a note on the airfield inviting his

surely found sympathy in British cinemas. As Michael Paris notes in *Warrior Nation*, after 1918 large segments of the British population grew disillusioned with their political and military leadership and this disillusionment sometimes manifested itself in rebellious fictional characters.¹⁵⁹ This fraternity is also apparent in the film's climax when Courtney is shot down after his solo attack against the German munitions depot; as Courtney dies he exchanges salutes with the German pilot who shot him down. Later, German pilots return Courtney's goggles and helmet to his base. Phipps declares:

A very gallant gentleman died this afternoon and for what? What have all these deaths accomplished? So many fine chaps have died in this war and are going to die in future wars. That's all gentlemen.¹⁶⁰

This is, obviously, speaking beyond the chivalry between pilots and the characters in the film and directly to the audience. Little did cinemagoers in the UK know, they were watching this film only six months before the outbreak of the Second World War.

Perhaps the most important scene in the establishment of the pilot ethos is the arrival of a captured German pilot – Hauptmann Müller – the man thought to have shot down and killed Scott. The thought of meeting each other thrills Müller and Courtney; Courtney asks if he would “drink a toast to the dead.”¹⁶¹ The men continue to drink and sing together, only interrupted by Hollister, who has recently lost a friend on a mission. Hollister tries to remind Courtney (who by this point in the scene is quite drunk) that Scott is dead and that Müller killed him. When Hollister collapses sobbing, Müller asks Courtney if his friend is a flyer. The question implies that such behaviour is unusual,

enemies to aerial combat. Eventually one of the aviators is killed and, just as in *The Dawn Patrol*, the survivors vow revenge. *Press Book: Hell in the Heavens*. Fox Film Corporation. BFI Library.

¹⁵⁹ Paris, *Warrior Nation*, 166.

¹⁶⁰ *The Dawn Patrol*, 101 minutes. This also taps into a common theme found in interwar cinema of the Great War: redemption and the resurrection of the dead. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, 137.

¹⁶¹ *The Dawn Patrol*, 34 Minutes.

even inappropriate for a pilot. Hollister is further ostracized when he does not participate in the boisterous tomfoolery in the mess hall.¹⁶²



Illustration 2: Courtney, Scott, and another RFC pilot enjoying a drink in the mess

There is also a bond of loyalty between the flying officers and the non-commissioned officers, but there are reminders of the rigid class structures of Edwardian and later interwar British society. British aviators during the First World War were mostly middle class or higher, so too were interwar celebrity flyers.¹⁶³ In *Hell's Angels*, the relationship between the pilots and their batmen is rigid and almost antagonistic. The two brothers clearly fit into upper social stratum: they are vacationing in the home country of their German schoolmate, Karl, at the beginning of the film; they attend Oxford; they attend a gala ball at a country manor with their shared love interest, Helen,

¹⁶² According to a biography of Hawks, he deliberately inserted this scene to show audiences how important camaraderie was to aviators during the war. Farmer, *Celluloid Wings*, 62.

¹⁶³ Lee Kennett, *The First Air War, 1914-1918* (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 118 and Smith, *Taking to the Skies*.

who is also quite wealthy; they are able to enter the RFC directly from civilian life as flying officers from at the outbreak of hostilities. Roy and Monte's squadron cook is old and has a rough accent – he is clearly meant to be of a lower class than the men he is serving. Clarifying this point is the way which the officers treat him: they are very rude when demanding bread; they complain about the soup he is serving; finally, they let out rapturous laughter when he trips and falls while rushing to bring their soup.¹⁶⁴ This is the only instance in the film when the usually polite and mild-mannered Roy acts boisterously and rude. Indeed, their insults, jokes (including cigar ash being sprinkled on someone's head), and jabs show that Hughes hoped to convey a sense camaraderie and youthful enthusiasm.

In contrast to *Hell's Angels*, in *The Dawn Patrol* the relationship between these groups is always presented as positive and supportive. For example, the mechanics prove to be competent and legitimately interested in the safety of the pilots and condition of the airplanes. They serve the pilots breakfast happily, handing out newspapers and food. They greet the flyers with concern and enthusiasm when they return from missions, help Courtney and Scott on their mischievous and clandestine solo mission against von Richter, and they join the pilots in mourning the death of Courtney at the end of the film. However, the mechanics and cooks are clearly meant to be lower class than the pilots; their appearance is rough and accents are universally working class, distinguishing them from the clean-cut and posh-accented aviators.

The Reluctant Warriors: Patriotism and Disillusionment

¹⁶⁴ *Hell's Angels*, 72 minutes.

As Graham Dawson notes, the war-weariness of 1920s and 1930s presented serious challenges to the warrior-hero narrative that had dominated British culture since the Napoleonic Wars.¹⁶⁵ First World War aviation films in the 1930s handled the issue of disillusionment with varying degrees of effectiveness. Nearly every picture depicting the First World War in the air, including *Hell's Angels* and *The Dawn Patrol*, addresses the issue of war-weariness, directly tapping into what Michael Paris has labelled the “prevailing mood” of the period.¹⁶⁶ Typically, filmmakers would express their war-weariness by emphasizing the psychological trauma of the war. In almost all cases the protagonists are killed in action; or they crack under the pressure. The 1933 film *Ace of Aces* is a good example of Hollywood trying to send an anti-war message. Another work by screenwriter John Monk Saunders, it tells the story of how a pacifist sculptor becomes a cold-blooded killer when he enlists in the American Aviation Section.¹⁶⁷ This is taken even further in *The Eagle and the Hawk*, when the film's protagonist gives an impassioned speech decrying war and then commits suicide.¹⁶⁸ His comrades cover up the suicide to preserve his honour. The protagonists in *Hell's Angels* Roy and Monte also die honourably, aiding an Allied offensive; while in *The Dawn Patrol*, Courtney dies destroying a German munitions depot.

In *Hell's Angels*, the anti-war messaging is clear. Roy, of course, is proud of his military service and his abilities as a pilot: he glows when Helen compliments his uniform and answers back quickly and with pride to correct a woman who mistakes him

¹⁶⁵ Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, 236.

¹⁶⁶ Paris, “Wings,” 9.

¹⁶⁷ *Ace of Aces*, 46 minutes.

¹⁶⁸ *Picturegoer Weekly*, May 11, 1935. This type of story can also be found in films like *Hell in the Heavens*, in which the lead (played by Werner Baxter) is a tattered and nervous aviator, *Legion of the Condemned*, directed by William A. Wellman (Los Angeles: Paramount, 1928), and *Young Eagles*, directed by William A. Wellman, (Los Angeles: Paramount, 1930).

for an infantry officer. When he returns from his first solo flight (and the first time the viewer sees him in his flight gear) he greets his comrades with enthusiasm. Clearly, he embodies the warrior elements of the flyer persona: he has a firm sense of duty and responsibility and is an accomplished combat pilot.¹⁶⁹ Yet, Roy is portrayed in contrast to his brother – Monte reacts to military service less enthusiastically, but more vocally. He sarcastically hums “God Save the King” as his companions approach him and he lies about his first flight being “great.”¹⁷⁰ Monte breaks when one of the brothers’ fellow pilots returns from a mission giving graphic details about the death of another aviator: “Stop! I can’t stand it!”¹⁷¹ After he is accused of cowardice Monte yells out: “I’ll get it sooner or later, we’ll all get it! Isn’t there any end?”¹⁷² Monte continues his awkward disillusioned rhetoric after their commanding officer issues orders for that evening. He proclaims:

I’m not yellow. I can see things as they are and I am sick of this rotten business. What are you fighting for, patriotism, duty? Are you mad? They are just words that politicians and profiteers use to get you to fight for them! What’s a word compared to life? The only life you’ve got! Murder!¹⁷³

It is unfortunate this diatribe is delivered by Monte, given the cowardly character traits he is given.

The Dawn Patrol took a considerably more anti-war tone than *Hell’s Angels*. The social and political contexts had changed significantly since 1930. By the release of *The Dawn Patrol* in Britain in early 1939 a malaise had settled in the liberal democracies of

¹⁶⁹ *Hell’s Angels*, 69 minutes. Roy’s ability as a flyer is established in the conversation he has with Helen and an Army Captain in the canteen. She asks if he has shot down any Germans in the three weeks since he arrived in France, he answers “yes, a couple.”

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 24 minutes.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 72 minutes.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 75 minutes.

the West as they were only modestly recovering from the Great Depression. Worse still, totalitarianism had spread throughout much of Europe and the continent seemed to be moving toward an inevitable war. Additionally, as noted in chapter two, ample evidence of the airplane's destructive potential had accumulated since 1930.¹⁷⁴

In *The Dawn Patrol*, the nervous, fidgety, and tattered Major Brand serves a number of purposes that directly connect to aviation, warfare, and disillusionment during 1930s. First, Brand acts as a source for much of the anti-war tone of the film; at numerous points he laments what the war has done to Britain and its youth. Throughout the film he is depicted on the telephone arguing against the orders of his superiors who are ordering him to send his squadron of under-trained and poorly equipped flyers against what are depicted as seasoned German pilots. He also acts as a champion for the British flyer, saying on more than one occasion that the pilots do their best and never complain about their missions. Still, his sense of duty outweighs his feelings for the flyers under his command: "you know what this place is? A slaughterhouse and I'm the butcher!"¹⁷⁵ The men under Brand's command fail to understand the difficulty of his position. For example, upon returning from a mission at the beginning of the film, Courtney (after having some drinks in the mess) reports the difficulty of the mission and two dead pilots to Brand, who berates Courtney for losing two men and then confronts him: "Tell me what's on your mind! That I am a murderer!"¹⁷⁶ Courtney, despite his clear disdain for Brand, replies, "I'm not blaming anyone," implying that he blames the war and those who got Britain involved, a point he will reiterate later. This contrast is also seen in the

¹⁷⁴ For more see Bialer, *The Shadow of the Bomber*, Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane*, Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire*, Patterson, *Guernica and Total War*, and Wohl, *The Spectacle of Flight*.

¹⁷⁵ *Hell's Angels*, 4 minutes.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 10 minutes.

men's relationship with drink. Unlike the other flyers who enjoy alcohol and the company that comes with it, Brand sips sherry alone while sitting in front of a fire.

Brand's stress comes to a head when he receives word that he will be promoted and chooses Courtney to replace him as squadron leader and endure the stress and pain of command. Once promoted, Courtney is transformed from a flyer-hero to a tortured commander. The change is captured by Major Brand's parting words:

So far the war has been a personal adventure for you, full of boom and glory. As an individual flyer you have been admirable and you have evaded responsibility with equally supreme skill, disobeyed orders, blamed me, accused me of putting kids into canvas coffins. Well listen to this, HQ loved your raid this morning so much that they've appointed me up to wing. And before I go, I am ordered to appoint someone in my place, here at my place at this little desk. That somebody is going to be you. See you how you like it, Mr. Squadron Commander Courtney!¹⁷⁷

Courtney is quickly and harshly introduced to the other side of the air war when the new group of replacements arrive, whom he must send into combat, including Scott's younger brother whom he ultimately sends to his death.¹⁷⁸

The filmmakers also used Captain Courtney's character to advance what seems to be an anti-war agenda. A conversation between Courtney and Donny clearly reflects the war-weariness of the time. In the conversation, Courtney takes a very different position than in the 1930 version of the film, when he instructs Donny to "take it like a man."¹⁷⁹ Instead, he delivers a diatribe on the ills of war, and those who cause it:

[War is a] great big noisy rather stupid game that doesn't make sense at all. No one knows what it's all about or why. Here we are going at it hammer and tongs. I betcha those fellows over there feel the same way, the enemy. Then one day I suppose it'll all end as suddenly as it begun and we'll go

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 58 minutes.

¹⁷⁸ The encounter between Scott and Courtney is heated. It is the first moment of tension between the men in the film.

¹⁷⁹ Farmer, *Celluloid Wings*, 125.

home. ‘Til some other bunch of criminal idiots sitting around a large table shoves us into another war and we’ll go at it again.¹⁸⁰

Courtney goes on to mention his father, a biology professor at Queen’s (presumably Queen’s University Belfast, where Flynn’s actual father was a biology professor from 1931 to 1948), who once told him “man is a savage animal who periodically, to relieve his nervous tension, tries to destroy himself.”¹⁸¹ After Donny’s death, the relationship between Courtney and Scott fractures, as do Courtney’s nerves; he starts to resemble Brand. In the end, Courtney atones for Donny’s death by flying a dangerous mission in Scott’s place. Even before his death, the horrors of the Great War in the air had victimized Courtney. Indeed, Courtney, like Scott and Brand in *The Dawn Patrol*, and along with Roy and Monte in *Hell’s Angels*, were and remain the classic image of First World War flyer-heroes: men who dutifully, swiftly, and with profound individuality inflicted death and destruction on their enemies, while trying to escape the guilt and realities of their deeds by drinking, singing, and hell-raising.

Disproportionately Destructive: The Image of the Airplane

The general trend on screen during the interwar years was to overstate the capabilities of First World War aircraft. The aviator’s weapon, as it is presented in both films participates in common 1930s perceptions of the aircraft: an ultra-modern and highly destructive source of both liberation and death. More specifically, films depicting the First World War in the air played into and even helped perpetuate the idea that future wars were likely to be destructive, even cataclysmic, affairs. This, however, does not appear to have been merely for cinematic effect, though it surely played a role. In fact,

¹⁸⁰ *The Dawn Patrol*, 70 minutes.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

these films participated in, and pandered to, widely held fears of aerial bombing in the 1920s and 1930s, especially the mid to late 1930s. Again, both *Hell's Angels* and *The Dawn Patrol* exemplify this trend.

The aerial sequences redeem *Hell's Angels* from its otherwise weak plot and acting.¹⁸² Hughes's direction – in this and the other aerial sequences – actually helps convey the sense of speed and excitement surrounding flying. Shots during aerial fighting sequences are usually quite short and are often at angles meant to exaggerate the speed and manoeuvrability of the airplanes.¹⁸³ The airplanes in the film are almost always shot against a background – clouds or the ground below – to convey a sense of speed. From the very first appearance of the airplane on screen – around a British airfield – planes are continually swooping, diving and rolling.

Perhaps the most memorable scene in *Hell's Angels* is the Zeppelin raid on London.¹⁸⁴ From its first appearance, the Zeppelin is meant to appear menacing and dangerous.¹⁸⁵ Interestingly, the shot Hughes uses to convey the size of the Zeppelin relative to the rest of the city is remarkably similar to propaganda images used by the British government.¹⁸⁶ When the airship is detected over the city, an air raid is sounded and the lights go dim – a Zeppelin is something for Britons to fear. Not only does the

¹⁸² Skogsberg, *Wings on the Screen*, 8.

¹⁸³ This was a fairly common cinematic technique in the period in types of films ranging from features like *Hell's Angels* to documentaries, newsreels, and education films.

¹⁸⁴ The German crew are depicted as wooden and militaristic with sensationalized accents. The zeppelin captain is cold, methodical, and patriotic, relishing his opportunity to destroy Trafalgar Square. This scene is copied in the 1930 film *The Sky Hawk*, right down to the German-speaking crew and the valiant defence of England by the RFC. *Film Spectator*, January 18, 1930. *The Sky Hawk*, directed by John G. Blystone (Los Angeles: Fox, 1929). This depiction of Germans is established in the film's opening scene. It is a stereotypical German setting with Bavarian music playing, traditional dress, drinking from beer steins and overdone German phrases like "wunderbar!"

¹⁸⁵ *Hell's Angels*, 40 minutes. It takes a full twenty seconds for the Zeppelin to emerge from the cloud. There is also a deep and loud drone of the engines.

¹⁸⁶ Specifically referring to the famous 1915 propaganda poster distributed by Publicity Department that depicts a Zeppelin over St. Paul's and Big Ben with the caption "It is far better to face the bullets than to be killed at home by a bomb. Join the Army at once & help to stop an air raid. God Save the King."

viewer's awe of the Zeppelin come from its size, but also its technological sophistication. It has advanced radios, telephones, diesel engines, and elaborate interior construction; the Zeppelin seems like a highly advanced and formidable weapon. This point is only advanced further by the actual attack on London. Briefly, the film grossly overstates airpower's destructive potential by showing massive bombs in its bomb bay that dwarf the crew. It is difficult to determine how powerful these bombs are intended to be because a disillusioned Karl drops them into water.¹⁸⁷ Nevertheless, he falsely reports to the captain that they have successfully destroyed Trafalgar Square – accuracy that would have been impossible in the First World War in any event. Nevertheless, it loomed large in British popular opinion and views of aerial warfare throughout the interwar period.¹⁸⁸ Despite its power, RFC aircraft ultimately down the airship after a fierce struggle. The Zeppelin sequences left a mark on viewers and filmmakers. The terror they caused in London during the war, certainly lived on in the memories of moviegoers. Numerous subsequent First World War air films, such as *The Sky Hawk* and more recently *Flyboys* (2006), would couple defence against Zeppelins and self-sacrifice in the very same way. Most notably, in *The Sky Hawk*, a paraplegic aviator regains the admiration of his colleagues by shooting down a Zeppelin.¹⁸⁹

The film continues its exaggeration of aerial bombardment's lethality in its climatic aerial sequence. The brothers volunteer to attack a German ammunition dump in a stolen Gotha Bomber (actually a modified Sikorsky). As was the case with the Zeppelin raid, from its first appearance on screen, the bomber is meant to convey size and power: it dwarfs the men loading bombs into its bomb bays; another officer reminds the

¹⁸⁷ *Hell's Angels*, 50 minutes.

¹⁸⁸ For more see Grayzel, *At Home and Under Fire*.

¹⁸⁹ *The Sky Hawk* and *Flyboys*, directed by Tony Bill (Los Angeles: Electric Entertainment, 2006).

brothers that the “machine weighs 20,000lbs.”¹⁹⁰ The attack on the ammunition dump is spectacular, but unrealistic. With their lone aircraft, Roy and Monte destroy multiple buildings and trucks, rendering the ammunition dump inoperable. The destruction wrought by the brothers in their single bomber can be contrasted with the results of the Zeppelin and Gotha raids on London during the war. By the end of the First World War Zeppelins had dropped only 6,000 bombs on the entire United Kingdom, causing fewer than 2,000 casualties, 556 of which were fatal.¹⁹¹ By contrast, nearly 1,200 people died with the sinking of the RMS Lusitania in 1915. The Gotha raids on London were more destructive, but still not devastating.¹⁹² During the year-long blitz of London from May 1917 to May 1918, 450 German sorties dropped 105,000kg of explosives on London, killing 836, wounding just under 2,000, and causing £1.5 million in damages.¹⁹³ Their destructiveness did not approach what is depicted in the film.

It is not only British aviators who are seen to be masters of a fast and mobile technology. The film pays considerable attention – one full minute – to the skill and precision of German pilots. They are shown taking off and flying with geometric precision. Their planes are painted black and have distinctive markings, distinguishing them from the British ones, and making them appear more menacing. Their clash with the RFC squadron escorting Roy and Monte’s bomber set the standard for depictions of aerial warfare during the interwar period. Each of the shots effectively conveys a sense of high speed and suspense. There is much emphasis on the prowess of the individual

¹⁹⁰ *Hell’s Angels*, 91 minutes.

¹⁹¹ Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality*, 22.

¹⁹² The most lethal of which was on June 17, 1917, when fourteen Gotha bombers attacked London at mid-day, killing 162 and injuring 432.

¹⁹³ Neil Hanson, *The First Blitz: The Secret Plan to Raze London to the Ground in 1918* (London: Corgi Books, 2009), 447-448.

aviator. When the planes come together they each dive, turn, and roll, displaying their mobility and the skill of the pilots. The German ace is shown throughout the clash, calmly observing the duelling aircraft from above (he is dressed in all-black flight gear) before swooping in to attack and ultimately shooting down Roy and Monte's bomber, along with other RFC pilots.¹⁹⁴ Tension and death are mixed in with the aerial sequences: one German aviator is shown sneaking a drink from a flask during the fighting; another burns alive screaming as his cockpit fills with flames; a third pilot waves to the man who had shot him down as his plane goes down. All told, aerial warfare – as depicted in *Hell's Angels* – was an extremely fast and dangerous affair, in which the individual skill of the aviator was as important, if not more important, than the airplane they were piloting.

This treatment of aerial warfare and the airplane was common throughout the 1930s. Films such as *Wings*, *The Eagle and the Hawk*, *Aces of Aces*, the original *The Dawn Patrol*, and more emphasize the dangerous brutality of aerial warfare. *The Dawn Patrol* continued this trend. As noted earlier, the air-to-air footage in the film is the same as the 1930s version. Yet, the treatment of the airplane provides less allure than in *Hell's Angels*. Despite the more sober approach, the capabilities of the airplane are still exaggerated. The best examples of this are the two bombing raids depicted in the picture: one, Courtney and Scott's attack on a German airfield; and two, Courtney's raid on a German munitions depot at the film's conclusion. As in *Hell's Angels*, the aircraft the men are flying on their raids – the Sopwith Camel – were not capable of the devastation

¹⁹⁴ *Hell's Angels*, 100-123 minutes.

they wreaked in the film.¹⁹⁵ Despite their strength, in the end, it is a single German aviator who eventually defeats Courtney.¹⁹⁶

The airplane is also a source of pain and disillusionment, and a location for the reinforcement of social values. It casts a huge shadow on these flyers' lives. After helping end the lives of their comrades in the sky, the airplane was helping drive men to drink. This can partially challenge the idea that for the flyer, technology was liberating and empowering. On the contrary, technology was omnipresent in the life of pilots, in much the same way it was for the men who were suffering from the dehumanization caused by artillery and machine-guns.

However, only the pilots have this relationship with the airplane. The mechanics only interact with damaged and broken planes on the ground; as noted earlier, their accents and appearance always convey a sense of lower class, while the pilots appear to be elites. Additionally, the 59th Squadron's airplanes are a point of stress for Major Brand; he often cites the superiority of the German airplanes, and the British Camels are held together with "spit and glue."¹⁹⁷

Nonetheless, the depiction of the airplane in *The Dawn Patrol* also helps convey the traditional notions associated with the aviator: freedom, speed and individuality. The shots of the airplanes are often meant to convey speed. The pilots in the 59th Squadron use their airplane to express their individuality. Each of the flyers has a coloured piece of cloth trailing behind their helmet. There is also an effort to convey a sense of individuality in the German pilots. The paint-schemes of their aircraft are distinct and often have their names on the side of the plane, as was the case during the war. Perhaps

¹⁹⁵ Kennett, *The First Air War*, 49 & 78.

¹⁹⁶ *The Dawn Patrol*, 98 Minutes.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10 Minutes.

the strongest way the airplane conveys individuality in *The Dawn Patrol* is not necessarily through those who are skilled at wielding it as a weapon, but those who are not. Those pilots who do not yet possess combat skills are separated from those who have them, both British and German. In this sense, their inexperience and lack of training highlights the individual nature of aerial combat as it is depicted in the film. It is clear that *The Dawn Patrol* at least participated in, and likely contributed to, the anxiety surrounding the airplane during the late 1930s. But to what extent did the British public accept First World War aviation as it was presented in these two films?

Exploiting the Airman: Promotion of *Hell's Angels* and *The Dawn Patrol*

The studios primarily used star power, whether it was the actors or the proprietor (in the case of *Hell's Angels*, Hughes), and aviation to promote these films.¹⁹⁸ Indeed, the promotional campaign for *Hell's Angels* would have touched on other critical selling points of features at the time: sex appeal, love triangles, and action/adventure. Specifically, Jean Harlow's sex appeal was used when adventure may not have been adequate. More important was the prominent role Howard Hughes played in financing and producing the picture. Promotional material called on viewers to see his "Four Million Dollar talking picture."¹⁹⁹ Other tag-lines included "Howard Hughes' thrilling air spectacle" or "Howard Hughes' 800k-pound picture." Hughes helped the promotion of the film because of his exploits as both a filmmaker and an aviator. For example, promotional material for the film placed considerable emphasis on the magnate's

¹⁹⁸ *Exhibitors' Campaign Book: Hell's Angels*, United Artists Film Corporation Limited, Wardour Street, London: British Film Institute Library Microfilm Collection.

¹⁹⁹ *Exhibitors' Campaign Book: Hell's Angels*. *Sky Devils* also used the extravagance of Hughes's filmmaking to try to get British cinemagoers into the theatre. *Campaign Book: Sky Devils*, United Artists.

willingness to spend his time and money making the film “the screen’s most daring achievement.”²⁰⁰ The film’s promotional material is replete with specifics on the extravagance of the film. For example, it claimed that it cost Howard Hughes \$120,000 to restore old First World War airplanes and \$400,000 to keep them in the sky. Press books also make note that Hughes was willing to “smash” airplanes at will to ensure the best shots were captured. All of this extravagance led promoters to contend that “all future pictures of this sort can be but feeble anti-climaxes” and that in 2031 the world will still be talking about *Hell’s Angels*.

Aviation also featured prominently in the promotional posters of *Hell’s Angels*. On some of the posters, the title of the film was spelled out in a cloud trailing behind an airplane. Images of the three stars of the film always included the men in uniform and in many cases the stars are looking up (presumably towards the sky) with looks of wonder on their faces. Even more common were posters that featured a Zeppelin, either menacingly hovering above London or going down in flames with British aircraft swarming around it; in British promotional material the RFC roundel is conspicuously displayed on the planes’ wings.²⁰¹ Additionally, trying to promote one of the critical scenes of the film, the marketing campaign often featured Zeppelins; in many posters the crew of the Zeppelin that attacks London in the film were depicted, often using wireless radio.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ *Exhibitors’ Campaign Book: Hell’s Angels*.

²⁰¹ Often American film studios used very similar, if not identical press books to promote their films in the United Kingdom, with only subtle changes in spelling, currency, correspondence, and ordering information. However, in the case of *Hell’s Angels*, there is a difference in the airplanes featured in the promotional books. In the American case, the airplanes lack any kind of markings.

²⁰² *Special Souvenir Number, Gaumont-British Pictorial: Hell’s Angels*.



Illustration 3: A promotional poster for *Hell's Angels*

What is more telling are the tag-lines used in the posters: “Aces Fight Terrific Air Battle for Film,” “The Only Authentic Picture of Air Warfare Ever Produced,” “Top Thrills in Smashing Air Drama” and “Thrilling Multi-million Dollar Air Spectacle.” These tag-lines are clearly an attempt by United Artists to appeal to the popularity and commonly held views of flying in the period; it was thrilling, exciting, and dangerous. Despite the numerous other films made on the very same subject throughout the period, *Hell's Angels* publicists tried to portray it as the first authentic depiction of the First World War in the air, implying that previous depictions were unsatisfactory and this film

was what people “had been waiting for.”²⁰³ There are a number of attempts in the promotional materials for *Hell's Angels* to emphasize the realism of the film, both to shock viewers and give the film authenticity. To support their claims about the realistic depiction of aerial warfare, the promoters claimed that members of the Overseas Aviators Club viewed the film and were impressed by how effectively it depicted the air war. Gaumont British accepted the film as “a graphic depiction of the world war in the air” that would shock viewers.²⁰⁴

Beyond posters, cinemas used other gimmicks to draw attention to the film. For example, cinemas were instructed to place miniature airplanes and dirigibles on their rooftops and hired airplanes to tow marquees across the sky. In city centres, bookstores and book dealers were encouraged to tie the film to their aviation book sales.²⁰⁵ In many cases these gimmicks tried to connect to the perceived modernity of the aeronautical technology featured in the film. They placed airplane silhouettes in shop windows. The press books for *Hell's Angels* claimed, “aviation ballyhoos are the thing to use to promote *Hell's Angels*.” United Artists also suggested that cinema proprietors try to get the public actively involved in the promotion of the film. For example, for youngsters, promotional campaigns suggested that cinema owners post essay contests in local newspapers asking young people aviation-inspired questions like: “Who is the most fearless aviator?” “What did I feel like on my first aeroplane ride?” “Why should I be an aviator?” “Are the airplane fights the real thing?” “What will aviation be like fifty years from now?”

²⁰³ *Exhibitors' Campaign Book: Hell's Angels*.

²⁰⁴ *Special Souvenir Number, Gaumont-British Pictorial: Hell's Angels*. A tag-line from the Exhibitors' campaign book is being referred to in the second half of this sentence: “you may be shocked, but you'll never forget it!”

²⁰⁵ *Exhibitors' Campaign Book: Hell's Angels*.

“Discuss aviation as the focus of human progress.”²⁰⁶ These essay questions promoted the idea that the youth of Great Britain were keenly interested in flight, while also highlighting how that interest seemed to intersect with larger trends in airmindedness in Great Britain and Europe during the interwar period: there was a profound interest in the Great War in the air; the airplane was seen as a driving force of modernity; and aviators were thought of as heroes and members of the elite.

Studio attempts to promote the film went beyond the cinema and high street. They suggested collaborating with local RAF bases in efforts to promote the film. Related to the RAF, they recruited RAF officers to appear at local premieres and speak to the accuracy of the film’s aviation sequences. What can be said is that the stars played (with the exception of Jean Harlow and her superficial role) a very minor role in the promotion of *Hell’s Angels* to the British public. Indeed, Howard Hughes and United Artists tried to get British moviegoers to see *Hell’s Angels* by trying to give them “the immortal drama of aviation.”²⁰⁷ How did British film critics, the British film industry, and the public react to the film? That question will be explored later in this chapter.

By contrast, with *The Dawn Patrol*, without romantic sub-stories or female leads, Warner Bros. had little choice but to concentrate on Errol Flynn’s star power and the air war. The use of Errol Flynn as the primary marketing focus was not unusual for a period when cinemagoers would often choose their film based on who was starring in it.²⁰⁸ It also recalled the heroic roles that had made Flynn famous. The film’s marketing campaign placed a premium on Flynn as a hero-flyer (he was a licensed pilot) and tried to connect the actor to the character he played in the film. Specifically, the campaign plan

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ *Special Souvenir Number, Gaumont-British Pictorial: Hell’s Angels.*

²⁰⁸ Richards, *Age of the Dream Palace*, 24.

for *The Dawn Patrol* claimed Errol Flynn “could be the real-life version of the character he plays in *The Dawn Patrol*.”²⁰⁹ The Warner Bros. campaign book asserted that aviation was Flynn’s second favourite hobby after acting.²¹⁰



Illustration 4: A Promotional Poster for *The Dawn Patrol*

Flynn was depicted not simply as a pilot but as 59th Squadron’s ace.²¹¹ This ace image appeared frequently in promotional material. Most striking is the image of him standing in his flight gear holding a pistol, or in a flight helmet wearing goggles that can be seen in almost all the marketing material; nearly every poster, cut-out, and newspaper advertisement feature Flynn-as-an-aviator. In most photos, he appears to be war-weary

²⁰⁹ Warner Brothers Campaign Plan: *The Dawn Patrol*. London: Warner House, Wardour Street. British Film Institute Library.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Warner Brothers Campaign Plan: *The Dawn Patrol*.

and tired (certainly representative of the popular perceptions of warfare at the time). In the photo of Flynn in flight gear, his character is obviously meant to be distressed – his face is dirty and its expression is one of fatigue and disillusionment; he is usually holding a cigarette in photos. This image becomes even stronger when contrasted with how Flynn is depicted in the film before he acquires command – a rebellious, fun-loving, and hard-drinking ace flyer. The only promotional material in which Flynn’s character and the other members of the squadron appear to be enjoying themselves is when they are shown drinking alcohol.

Along with Flynn, Warner Bros. also emphasized the masculinity and acting talents of each of the leads: Niven, Rathbone, and Flynn were all praised in the promotional material for their ability to project “strong, virile honest masculine emotion.” Cinemagoers would have been used to seeing Niven, Rathbone, and Flynn sharing the screen in swashbuckling roles. Warner Bros. claims that the group of men in *The Dawn Patrol* were the greatest collection of male actors ever to share the screen.²¹² What is especially interesting about this was Warner Bros.’s focus on the actors’ presentation of masculinity, both on screen and in promotional material. Their weathered uniforms, grooming, behaviour, and posture all convey notions of strength, virility, and toughness.²¹³

The aviators presented in the marketing material for *The Dawn Patrol* were notably more restless and war-weary than others of the interwar period. As opposed to their heroic depiction in the promotional material for other films such as *Hell’s Angels*,

²¹² Warner Bros. Campaign Plan: *The Dawn Patrol*.

²¹³ One particular publicity photo shows Flynn, Rathbone, and Niven looking skywards with obviously distressed looks on their faces; despite the concern, there is still an air of confidence and strength. This image is contrasted by a photo on the same page of the lead characters toasting while smiling. Warner Bros. Campaign Plan: *The Dawn Patrol*.

The Dawn Patrol (1930), and *The Eagle and the Hawk*, the aviators in the promotional material for the 1938 version of *The Dawn Patrol* personify the war-weary tone of the film. Promotional material for *The Dawn Patrol* (1930) and *The Eagle and the Hawk* emphasized the leads (Richard Barthelmess and Cary Grant, respectively), and downplayed their tortured appearance. In the promotional material for *The Dawn Patrol*, however, Flynn and his comrades were more obviously presented as tragic heroes: “untrained, unknowing and unafraid, they roared into each blood-red dawn on fighting wings of glory! Gay reckless gallant, boys all...they battled for women they’d never seen, for love they might never know!”²¹⁴ There were many references to love and romance in the marketing for *The Dawn Patrol*, even though no women appear in the film.²¹⁵ At the same time, there was an effort to connect this fatalism to other popular perceptions of the pilot as reckless and rebellious during the interwar years: “their laughter is louder, their love gayer, their courage more reckless, for every dawn may be their last.”²¹⁶ Still, the fact that these warriors were pilots – and in the public’s eye a unique form of warrior – was not lost on the promoters of the film, who were always sure to connect them to their reckless and wild personas: “the frolicking flyers who night after night before they take off on their death-dealing dawn patrols join in mad fun are real men whose spirit it is easy to understand.”²¹⁷ This theme is echoed in numerous pre-prepared newspaper copy supplied by Warner Bros., all emphasizing the dangers of flying during the First World War and the gallantry of British aviators. Another pre-prepared article declares the film to

²¹⁴ *Warner Bros. Campaign Plan: The Dawn Patrol.*

²¹⁵ Some other tag-lines that contain reference to love include: “If he knows fear he hides it in his daring, if he knows love he hides it in his heart,” “At dawn these war-birds climb into battle! At dusk some of them return to live, love, and fight again!” and “Dawn found him: longing for a love he might never know, waiting for a rendezvous with death, dreading the terror that was to come!”

²¹⁶ *Warner Bros. Campaign Plan: The Dawn Patrol.*

²¹⁷ “The Dawn Patrol is a Thrilling and Inspiring Film,” *Warner Bros. Campaign Plan: The Dawn Patrol.*

be “a story of British wartime aviation, a moving and exciting compound of the pitiful, needless, gallantry of youth and the calmer courage of maturity.”²¹⁸

Promotional material also claimed that filmmakers used pilots who had been shot down by German aviators during the war, lending realism and authenticity to the film. Additionally, to make pilots appear to be even more daring it claimed that most First World War aviators did not survive more than 4.5 hours in the air and that pilots were “sent to certain death” when they enlisted in the RFC.²¹⁹ While this was true of British aviators during the worst period of the air war (spring 1915), it certainly does not speak for the whole conflict. It seems that Warner Bros. tried to create a sense that these were typical British aviators during the First World War, and the film was merely capturing an ordinary time in the service of RFC pilots. The character’s effort to cope with the danger of flying, and more sensationally, “certain death,” was an important selling point for Warner Bros.²²⁰

Even more interesting, Warner Bros. tried to draw a connection between the danger experienced by the characters in the film and the real-life the service of the actors who portrayed them. The reserve service of stars Basil Rathbone, David Niven, and Donald Crisp is mentioned in some of the pre-prepared newspaper articles and reviews.²²¹ In fact, British promotional material claimed that the production of the film was threatened because the three British leads were nearly called into service during an unnamed war scare in 1937. Also relating to war scares, Warner Bros. suggested that it was “timely” to use the newspaper as a forum for the discussion of the war-like nature of

²¹⁸ “The Dawn Patrol Arrives,” *Warner Bros. Campaign Plan: The Dawn Patrol*.

²¹⁹ *Warner Bros. Campaign Plan: The Dawn Patrol*.

²²⁰ TNA Air 1/39/15/7, “Casualties RFC/RAF for Entire War.”

²²¹ “War Scare Nearly Halts The Dawn Patrol,” *Warner Bros. Campaign Plan: The Dawn Patrol*.

human beings. Using Captain Courtney's proclamation that "man is a savage animal who periodically tries to relieve his nervous tension by destroying himself," Warner Bros. suggests asking readers the question: "Is war a sociological force that is inevitable or can the nations of the world achieve peace?"²²² As will be examined shortly, this is similar to a strategy used by United Artists to promote *Hell's Angels*. Yet, in the case of *Hell's Angels*, the question pertained to aviation as the focus of human progress.

Like promotional material for *Hell's Angels*, Warner Bros. used numerous aviation-inspired gimmicks, both in newspapers and in other locales such as the theatres themselves and other stores, to promote the film. Along these lines, promoters wrote fake interviews with Flynn meant to be put in local newspapers over a five-day period. Flynn, in character, asked questions like "I'm off to meet the aviator who flew a few months ago around the world, who is he?" or "Here's a toast to the great aviator who flew to the South Pole in 1929 and headed an expedition to the Arctic in 1935 [who is he?]" and "I'm talking to the man who was America's highest ranking war ace in 1918 and is now head of a large airline company?" As with previous aviation films, distribution companies suggested turning cinemas into something resembling aerodromes complete with windsocks with "dawn patrol" stitched on the side and model airplanes.

Presumably taking a cue from the promoters of *Hell's Angels* and *Test Pilot*, Warner Bros. also suggested that local cinema owners encourage the RAF to help them promote the film. Specifically, they recommended having members of the RAF or former members of the RFC share their war stories at showings of the film.²²³ Additionally, it was thought that the RAF might have been able to help by donating

²²² "Timely Topic for Debate," *Warner Bros. Campaign Plan: The Dawn Patrol*.

²²³ The RFC became the RAF when it merged with the Royal Naval Air Service in April 1918.

surplus uniforms, propellers, airplane parts, and RAF literature to cinemas for them to show in lobbies.²²⁴ Along with the help of the RAF, Warner Bros. suggested to cinema owners that they get the help of local Air Raid Precautions units to aid in the promotion of the film.

Additionally, there was a clear connection between the promotion of the film in the United Kingdom and the British government. An especially interesting anecdote that highlights not only how the film was marketed to the British public, but also speaks to the level of air-mindedness in Britain and the participation of the government in efforts to promote that air-mindedness by using film, was the premiere of *The Dawn Patrol* in Keighley, West Yorkshire. For the premiere of *The Dawn Patrol* the Ritz Keighley was turned into a miniature aerodrome: windsocks were placed on the theatre's flagpoles; planes were brought in from the local flying club and placed on the street adjacent to the theatre; and local RFC veterans attended the showing in uniform. Additionally, Marks and Spencer donated toy aeroplanes to decorate the lobby of the cinema. The local Air Cadets were even recruited to parade around town and then finish their parade at the cinema where the Mayor of Keighley inspected them. The townspeople clearly treated the film's premiere as an aviation event, not unlike the air shows and air races they were attending in large numbers during the period. Evidently this was not just a film distribution company pushing thrills and ideas on a population, but people acting out of their own interest in the film's subject matter.²²⁵

²²⁴ "Other Exploitation," *Warner Bros. Campaign Plan: The Dawn Patrol*. The press docket specifically mentions that *Test Pilot* was promoted in the United Kingdom with the assistance of the RAF; therefore it was assumed that acquiring RAF assistance to promote *The Dawn Patrol* would not have been a problem.

²²⁵ "Air Cadets Parade for Dawn Patrol," *Kinematograph Weekly*, July 27, 1939.

Accepting the Aviator: British Reviews

As noted in chapters one and two, it is possible to use newspaper and other print reviews to assess public responses to film during the interwar years.²²⁶ *Hell's Angels* was generally well received by British film critics and the British public.²²⁷ It was seen by the *Bioscope* as an “amazing picture of aerial warfare [that has] wonderful artistic value;” these qualities, said both the *Bioscope* and *Picturegoer Weekly*, would have “impressed any audience.”²²⁸ The *Bioscope* claimed that the promotional campaign launched by United Artists ensured a good kick-off for the film and would likely draw people to the Pavilion Theatre (one of the cinemas it was showing at in London) for some time.²²⁹

British cinema critics also saw the film as a technical success, and were especially impressed by what they thought was the film's ability to depict aerial warfare realistically. However, reviewers in the *Bioscope*, *Picturegoer*, and *Screen Mirror* were quick to remind British cinemagoers that as the film cost £800,000 and took nearly five years to make, they should expect something out of the ordinary.²³⁰ They specifically focused on Hughes's achievements with sound recording and camera work. *The Bioscope* praised the terrifying sound during the Zeppelin scene (referring to the drone of the Zeppelin's engines).²³¹ The sound quality was not only a result of the recording, but

²²⁶ Watson, *Fighting Different Wars*, 187.

²²⁷ This is essentially the consensus view of the picture, the particulars of which will be elaborated on below. This sentiment is also echoed in Wohl, Paris, and Skogsberg. Skogsberg contends that the film was better received by the public than it was by critics. However, there is no cited evidence of this point.

²²⁸ “Box-Office Film Reviews: Hell's Angels,” *Bioscope*, October 29, 1930, Lionel Collier, “Realism Costs £800,000,” *Picturegoer Weekly*, December 1930, 44-45

²²⁹ “Box Office Film Reviews: Hell's Angels,” *Bioscope*, October 29, 1930.

²³⁰ “Box-Office Film Reviews: Hell's Angels,” *Bioscope*, October 29, 1930, Lionel Collier, “Realism Costs £800,000,” *Picturegoer Weekly*, December 1930, 44-45, and Stephen Roy Conway, “Hell's Angels: Why Sid Gauman Took them Under his Wing Too,” *Screen Mirror*, June 1930, 20-21.

²³¹ “Sound and Dialogue Subjects: *Hell's Angels*,” *Bioscope*, October 29, 1930.

also of the new audio equipment that had been installed in cinemas like the Pavilion specifically for the release of *Hell's Angels*.

The *Bioscope* stated that the “amazing picture of aerial warfare” with “wonderful artistic value...will be acclaimed by the British public.”²³² *Picturegoer* stated that the film was a comprehensive look at aviation during the First World War: it included pictures of Zeppelin interiors, airplanes dropping bombs, a large bomber taking off, airplanes fighting in the sky, and London’s aerial defences.²³³ In particular, the *Bioscope* felt that the public would be especially pleased with the destruction of the Zeppelin at which point the film reaches “the height of dramatic fashion.”²³⁴ Reviewers saw the scenes of the Zeppelin dropping bombs as overpowering and impressive.²³⁵ In some cases, the realism of the film was thought to have gone too far. For example, pilots being shot and coughing up blood was seen as unnecessary and overly intense. Reviewers felt that people’s imaginations did not need such graphic depictions of war. This is an interesting point: the very same review of the film praises its realism, but only until the film becomes too graphic.

Criticism mostly focused on the poor story, weak acting, and insufficient character development. Reviewers of the film found the story implausible and poorly arranged. The *Bioscope* found the acting weak. Other reviews specifically targeted the strong American accents and “un-English” qualities of the so-called English lead characters. The review is especially critical of Harlow, who was allegedly brought in only for sex appeal and nothing more. More telling, Lionel Collier, *Picturegoer*’s

²³² “Box-Office Film Reviews: Hell’s Angels,” *The Bioscope*, October 29, 1930.

²³³ Lionel Collier, “Realism Costs £800,000,” *Picturegoer Weekly*, December 1930, 44-45.

²³⁴ “Box-Office Film Reviews: Hell’s Angels,” *The Bioscope*, October 29, 1930. The review goes on to say that the destruction of the airship is a “truly wonderful image.”

²³⁵ Lionel Collier, “Realism Costs £800,000,” *Picturegoer Weekly*, December 1930, 44-45.

reviewer, was concerned with the American depiction of British aviators: “I always find it hard in these American pictures of British troops to understand the sentimentality they lavish on the average pilot.”²³⁶ He specifically notes the tendency of the brothers to react hysterically to problems in their lives; this, according to Collier, certainly would not have been how a British soldier or flyer would have reacted, unless in a case of shell shock or extreme exhaustion.²³⁷ Collier’s comments interestingly represent British opinions about their aviators and warriors and British concerns about how American films were depicting their warriors. Collier argued, “there is still room for a British production dealing with the air force and it is about time we had one.”²³⁸ Furthermore, he goes on to claim that the RAF – which he says still has pilots who can thrill (referring to the Hendon Air Pageant) – should play a role in the production of a British film depicting the First World War in the air. Nevertheless, most major reviews of the film by British critics were positive – the realistic depiction of the First World War in the air was enough to override their concerns about the film. Whether or not *Hell’s Angels* was replete with poor acting and clichéd stories, it was – as both Michael Paris and Robert Wohl claim – a significant event in the history of aviation on film and American cinema. Additionally, it was also critically important to the history of the RFC and British aviators on film.

The promotional campaign must have had some impact in British military and government circles as the premiere was well attended by cabinet ministers and the British aviation community. Some of the notable attendees were Thomas Shaw, Secretary of State for War, James Henry Thomas, Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, the ambassadors from Belgium, Hungary, China, and Argentina, and Sir Alan Cobham,

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid.

arguably the most famous aviator in Great Britain at the time whose appearance at the premiere would have certainly drawn the attention of the British public. Along with these cabinet members and dignitaries, a large number of current and former RAF pilots also attended, including Lt. Col. J. T. C. Brazon, assessor of the R101 disaster, Lieutenant P. Connor, a transatlantic aviator, and the Canadian pilot Captain J. L. Boyd.²³⁹ Evidently, the British aviation community was well represented at the film's premiere.

Like many other aviation films of the period and notably *Hell's Angels*, *The Dawn Patrol* was well received by British film critics. The film garnered considerable praise for its aerial sequences. For example, the *Cinema* proclaimed the film's aerobatic sequences were the best yet filmed and rated the film "outstanding."²⁴⁰ Many British magazines treated the film as a motion picture event; in *Picturegoer Weekly* it received a two-page spread.²⁴¹ As Hynes points out, British cinema reviewers (who were often strongly anti-war) went to the cinema expecting to find the myth of the broken warrior. When they found it, they gave positive reviews; when they did not they provided negative ones.²⁴² With *The Dawn Patrol*, they were pleased. Like *Hell's Angels*, it was praised for its realism and film reviewers were especially pleased with what they saw as a sombre account of the air war. *Picturegoer Weekly's* review of *The Dawn Patrol* emphasized the film's character development, particularly its depiction of the men as tortured yet rebellious, citing their heavy drinking and theft of a motorcycle as examples. The review also explores the darker elements of being an RFC pilot during the First

²³⁹ The film premiered in the United States on June 7, 1930 to similar fanfare and spectacle: there were searchlights set-up around Grauman's Chinese Theater on Hollywood Boulevard; over fifty airplanes did a flyby; it was well attended by celebrities in Hollywood like Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, Gloria Swanson; the crowd, which was estimated to be around 50,000 had to be restrained by the US Marines and Los Angeles Police Department. Wohl, *Spectacle of Flight*, 130.

²⁴⁰ "The Dawn Patrol," *Cinema: News and Property Gazette*, December 7, 1938, 37.

²⁴¹ "Dawn Patrol," *Picturegoer Weekly*, 2 April 1939, 22-23.

²⁴² Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 448.

World War, and how they were “dealing death” as they flew through the sky. Like the film itself, the review draws on the scene involving the pilot’s boots to demonstrate the nature of British aviators – at least as they were depicted in the film. It emphasizes their “furious” reaction to von Richter’s taunting with the boots and Brand’s efforts to subdue their youthful enthusiasm, quoting Brand directly “don’t worry you’ll die soon enough.”²⁴³ The fatalism of the 59th Squadron’s pilots is also the primary focus of the review in *Picturegoer Weekly*. It claims that the film tries to create a story in which the viewer can understand the daily mental anguish of aviators. To corroborate the realism of the film, it also mentions that most pilots were pushed through flying courses in England, leaving them woefully unprepared for combat. In the words of *Picturegoer Weekly*:

These would be the lads whom Courtney and Brand, experienced in aerial combat, would watch go down in flames or in the enemy lines whilst they themselves, looping banking and dealing death with bomb and machinegun would be powerless to help.²⁴⁴

To this end, the review specifically mentions Brand’s comments about the 59th Squadron being a “slaughterhouse” and he (later Courtney) was the butcher. The overwhelming theme of *Picturegoer Weekly*’s review is the accuracy of *The Dawn Patrol*’s portrayal of the flyer-hero.

The review of *The Dawn Patrol* in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* also explored the darker aspects of being a First World War aviator, discussing at length the importance of Courtney’s transformation from a reckless aviator to a tortured and serious commander.²⁴⁵ It also emphasizes the sacrifice that Courtney ultimately makes to atone

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ “Dawn Patrol,” *Monthly Film Bulletin*, December 1, 1938, 278.

for sending Scott's brother to his death; the irony of this act leaving Scott in command of 59th Squadron is not lost on the reviewer. Indeed, *Monthly Film Bulletin* identifies the "the strain and tension on those who have to command in war" as the main theme of *The Dawn Patrol*; unlike previous films in the period, there is no love interest to distract from the struggles of war.²⁴⁶ The review of *Dawn Patrol* in the *Cinema* also emphasized the realistic depiction of the struggles of aviators during the First World War, praising the film for its exploration of the tortured characters of the 59th Squadron without the "recourse to sentimentality or theatrical effect."²⁴⁷ British newspaper reviews of *The Dawn Patrol* also emphasized the realistic treatment of the pilot's struggle with the reality of war. The *Times* praised the film while critiquing previous, more sanitized, depictions of the air war:

The sphere of modern war which appears to be still made for individual heroism, has often been used as a pretext for the heroics of popular fiction, but here it is treated with consistent, implacable, and extremely impressive realism.²⁴⁸

According to reviewers, the sombre tone of the film was only enhanced by the strong performance by the leads. Flynn, Rathbone and Niven were all praised for their ability to portray First World War aviators. The *Times* especially praised Niven, who was "brilliant" in his portrayal of the descent of Scott from a reckless and friendly flyboy to a war-racked pilot.²⁴⁹ The reviewers of *The Dawn Patrol* clearly saw the film for what it was: a sombre and cynical depiction of life in an RFC squadron during the First World War that, despite *Hell's Angels'* claims of realism, actually hit closer to the mark.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ "The Dawn Patrol," *Cinema: News and Property Gazette*, December 7, 1938, 37.

²⁴⁸ "New Films in London," *The Times*, February 20, 1939, 10.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that films depicting First World War aviators and aviation participated in the wider narrative of flight during the interwar years: aviators were boisterous warriors who dealt death from the sky and drank with equal enthusiasm; the airplane was one of the ultimate symbols of modern technology – fast, agile, and extremely powerful – even more so in the capable hands of an experienced aviator like Captain Courtney. What is most important than how flying and the flyer were depicted is the extent to which this vision was accepted by the British press and presumably the British public. At the heart of this, was their belief in the realism of both films. Upon analysis by British film reviewers, both films were considered to be realistic depictions of aerial warfare, including the extremely powerful, though completely inaccurate, bombing raids. In light of how destructive the airplane is depicted to be, it is no wonder that cinemagoers watching *The Dawn Patrol* in British cinemas just as diplomatic relations with Nazi Germany were coming to a boil in early 1939, came to fear what was starting feel like an inevitable aerial attack.

Britain's Guardians:
The Royal Air Force on the Screen

“The Royal Air Force carries a heavy burden in these critical days.”

-- British Movietone, August 1937

The 1930s were a period of fundamental change for the Royal Air Force (RAF). It had finally won the fight for existence that defined much of the 1920s and had firmly established itself as the third of three armed forces. By the outbreak of the Second World War the RAF had, for many, become Britain's only hope of meaningful defence, and the British government was spending more money on the RAF than either the Royal Navy or the Army. Despite its growing importance to the defence of both Britain and the Empire, the RAF still wrestled with its own public image. Its pilots were first seen as reckless troublemakers, and later as angels of death as war fears grew more pronounced. With this in mind, the RAF took distinct and deliberate measures to manage and cultivate its public image. Part of this public relations exercise involved using the cinema to help forge new ideas about the service. This chapter will demonstrate that the image the RAF hoped to convey to the British public was exactly the one that appeared in British cinema. It will first briefly outline the changes to the RAF in the 1930s, and the development and management of the service's Press and Publicity Branch, before looking at how the RAF appeared in British newsreels and feature films.

The Growth of the RAF and the Management of its Public Image

At the end of the First World War the Royal Air Force shrank to a fraction of its wartime size. It was left struggling not only to find an operational niche in the post-war British military, but also trying to justify its continued existence, as both the Army and Navy wanted it folded back into their services. Indeed, Hugh Trenchard, the Chief of the Air Staff, spent much of the 1920s fighting to keep the RAF a separate element of the British military. Defence policy in the 1920s – namely the ten-year rule – also kept the future of the force in doubt. It claimed that Britain would have ten years to prepare for any potential conflict, eliminating the need to maintain an air force. With no apparent need for an air force to fight on the continent or defend Britain from raiders, the RAF, championed by Winston Churchill, saved itself by arguing it was the most effective way Britain could police an empire that was now overstretched. Also aiding its survival were the Geddes and Salisbury Committee reports in the early 1920s that concluded a separate force was both more economical and necessary to keep Britain abreast of advances in aerial warfare. As a result, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Empire became hugely important to the Royal Air Force. It firmly established itself as the police force of the Empire and, with the help of Imperial Airways, a vital communications tool.¹ It is clear that the RAF was meant to be continuing Britain's deep-seated maritime and imperial

¹ Tony Mason, "British Air Power," in *Global Air Power*, ed. John Andreas Olsen (Washington: Potomac Books, 2010), 19. See also Michael Armitage, *The Royal Air Force: An Illustrated History* (London: Brockhampton Press, 1998), Bond, *British Military Policy between the Two World Wars*, Jafina Cox, "A Splendid Training Ground: The Importance to the Royal Air Force of its Role in Iraq, 1919-1932," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 13 (1985): 157-84, Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control*, Ian M. Philpott, *The Royal Air Force: An Encyclopaedia of the Interwar Years*, vols. 1 & 2 (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Aviation, 2005), Powers, *Strategy without Slide-Rule*, Satia, "The Defence of Inhumanity," Elmer B. Scovill, "The RAF and the Desert Frontiers of Iraq, 1919-1930," *Aerospace Historian* (June 1975): 84-90, Malcolm Smith, *British Air Strategy Between the Wars*, Anthony Towle, *Pilots and Rebels: The Use of Aircraft in Unconventional Warfare, 1918-1988* (London: Brassey's, 1989), and Charles Townshend, "'Civilization and Frightfulness': Air Control in the Middle East between the Wars," in Chris Wrigley, ed., *Warfare, Diplomacy, and Politics: Essays in Honour of A. J. P. Taylor* (London: Hamilton, 1986).

traditions and replacing the Royal Navy in Britain's imperial discourses.² Many strategists saw it as the best way for Britain to face a potentially three-front war against Germany in the North Sea, Italy in the Mediterranean, and Japan in the Pacific.³ This idea was reinforced in the British public sphere through events like the Empire Air Day (beginning in 1934), RAF air tours to the far reaches of the Empire, and RAF displays in imperial holdings.

The RAF's commitment to an offensive and destructive doctrine was also firmly entrenched between the 1920s and mid 1930s. A carryover from Trenchard's aggressive and disastrous doctrine of the Great War, when the RFC carried the war over German trenches despite the heavy casualties, the RAF was squarely focused on developing a large and powerful bomber force until late in the 1930s. This option, and a small fighter force, was preferred by most of the air staff throughout the decade. This bomber force would be so large and powerful that no nation, even a Hitler-controlled Germany, would dare attack out fear of destruction. This theory, adhered to by most of the Air Staff, was predicated on the notion of the bomber as an unstoppable force – one that Stanley Baldwin thought would “always get through.”⁴ After the Nazi rise to power in Germany and the gruesome display of the bomber's effectiveness during the Spanish Civil War, few people in Britain continued to question the need for the RAF. Parliamentarians, along with public officials, intellectuals, and military leaders, reacted with the temper of the times, and increased spending on the RAF starting in 1934. Almost immediately

² Pirie, *Air Empire*, 242.

³ Smith, *British Air Strategy between the Wars*, 309-310.

⁴ House of Commons Debates, November 10, 1932. Baldwin, contrary to representations in media and many historical works, was not the prime minister when he made the classic remark. In fact, he was First Lord of the Council and *de facto* prime minister. Ramsay MacDonald, while increasingly incapable of carrying out his duties, remained as prime minister until 1935.

following the German remilitarization of the Rhineland, in 1936 Parliament passed a series of expanded air defence schemes, which called for a considerable expansion of the service – mostly bombers – in order to catch up with the perceived rapid growth of the Luftwaffe.⁵

The RAF did have other strategic options. Britain could try to use diplomatic channels to place limits on the size and strength of air forces. This option, favoured by Ramsay MacDonald, was obviously not viable in the presence of a Hitler-led Germany that was committed to rearming, especially in the air.⁶ The third option, and ultimately the one the cabinet moved the RAF to in 1938 (just in the nick of time), shifted aircraft production and RAF strategy from an offensive bomber force to a defensive fighter force. It was hoped that the RAF – which by 1939 was receiving more government funding than both the army and the Royal Navy – could defeat the knockout blow in the air.⁷

The RAF prided itself on not being the socially elitist organization that the British Army and Royal Navy were seen to be and strove to be as meritocratic as possible and carve out its own cultural ethos. Despite these efforts, the officer corps of the RAF was anything but a close reflection of British society.⁸ University students, especially those with engineering degrees, were preferred in the RAF's recruitment campaigns. At the very least, most pilots were expected to have a public school or university background.

⁵ Graham Smith, *Taking to the Skies*, 256, and Armitage, *The Royal Air Force*, 67-74. From July 1934 to the outbreak of the Second World War, eight different air defences schemes were passed by parliament. They progressively called for more aircraft to be added to the RAF. However, it was not until Scheme L in April 1938 that the RAF's priority shifted from bombers to fighters.

⁶ See Joseph Maiolo, *Cry Havoc: How the Arms Race Drove the World to War, 1931-1941* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

⁷ Malcolm Smith, *British Air Strategy Between the Wars*, 319 and Mason, "British Air Power," 25. Developments in fighter technology allowed fighters to finally surpass the bomber in speed and manoeuvrability. Also, fighters were much cheaper to manufacture than bombers, allowing for the production of a larger force, relative to what could be produced in terms of bombers.

⁸ Francis, *The Flyer*, 14.

Further, notions of the character or honour of a potential officer were often evaluated above their intellectual quality or leadership potential.⁹ As Tony Mansell notes in his excellent study of the composition of the RAF officer corps in the 1930s, the RAF remained a largely elitist institution until the upper classes were no longer able to provide enough recruits.¹⁰ It was not until 1936 that the RAF established the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve (RAFVR) and the Air Cadets Corps (ACC) in 1938. Both were meant to get younger men interested in flying, and act as an early training ground for British flyers.¹¹ Also in 1938, the RAF established the Civil Air Guard, which offered to subsidized training for men and women between the ages of 18 and 50, so long as they agreed to serve the country in an emergency. The programme was a resounding success and highlights the level of interest in the RAF during the interwar period; it drew in over 35,000 volunteers, of which only 6,000 could be accepted.¹²

Beyond attempting to make the service appear more accessible and appealing, the RAF tried to create a different atmosphere in its flight schools and squadrons, which was facilitated by its lack of tradition and history.¹³ It adopted distinct sky-blue uniforms,

⁹ Mansell, "Flying Start," 73. The RAF under Trenchard was keenly interested in forging a close relationship with universities throughout the United Kingdom. It was thought that this could encourage the best and brightest of the country to enlist in the RAF, help promote airmindedness, and forge relationships between the RAF and engineering schools.

¹⁰ For example, the Auxiliary Air Force (AAF), created in 1924, was composed of almost entirely of Britain's elite. In fact, the AAF was amongst the most socially elite military groups in the United Kingdom during the 1930s; many pilots even flew aircraft which they paid for themselves. The uniform and textbooks of an RAF officer cost upwards of £100 and the registration fee was around the same amount. These fees left the RAF inaccessible to many. There was clearly a gulf between the rhetoric of the RAF and the reality of its composition. Mansell, "Flying Start," 71, "Emoluments of Officers of the General Duties Branch of the Royal Air Force," *Air Publication 121* (London, 1934), 1, and Edgerton, *England and Aeroplane*, 53.

¹¹ Graham Smith, *Taking to the Skies*, 290.

¹² *Ibid.* It should also be noted that registration in this programme was not free. In most cases the cost was at least £14 for the initiation fee and £10 for the licence and necessary equipment. Therefore, even a government subsidized flying scheme was available only to those who could pay the entry fees and had the spare time to learn to fly.

¹³ Mansell, "Flying Start," 88.

insignias, and ranks. Along with new uniforms there was also relaxed discipline in the RAF: flyers generally were not expected to salute; they drilled less frequently; and other protocols were not usually observed. During their furloughs pilots would often go yachting, golfing, and, more than anything, drinking. As a result, men in RAF uniforms were a common sight in pubs throughout the country, especially near RAF bases.¹⁴ Their regular attendance at pubs and their distinct appearance made RAF officers themselves a site for the formation of the British public's views about flying and flyers. This did not always positively affect how people saw pilots. The raucous behaviour of pilots in public settings proved detrimental to overall perceptions of aviators. There are numerous literary (and cinematic examples) of pilots picking fights, acting rowdily, driving badly, drinking profusely, and singing loudly – generally behaving in a lawless way.¹⁵ Many RAF wives reported being turned away from vacant apartments during the interwar years because landlords saw pilots as rowdy and their wives as bar women. The very same stories, however, report that the public looked on pilots with awe and respect for their mastery of a new and powerful technology. All the while, pilots were seen as heroes, particularly to schoolboys all over Britain. In some ways flyers did not help this situation; they prided themselves, and in many cases, flaunted the belief they were the new breed of warrior, the only ones who could bring a war to the enemy using the most modern technology.¹⁶

By 1935 the British public was growing more fearful of attack from the air; RAF pilots were often associated with this annihilation that cast some as dark figures. These

¹⁴ Francis, *The Flyer*, 15. What made this relaxed atmosphere even more controversial was the fact that flyers would taunt and tease members of other services for their stiffness and rigidity

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16-18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

reckless flyboys were going to be Great Britain's only line of defence from aerial destruction in the event of war with Germany. There was a paradoxical opinion of RAF pilots in the lead-up to the Second World War; people simultaneously saw them as lawless, destructive, and glamorous. It was not until well into the Second World War, specifically the Battle of Britain, that the public came to see pilots as heroes above all. Still, during the 1930s, the RAF appeared as heroes in newsreels, suggesting the RAF was trying to counteract negative perceptions.

The RAF, especially after it started re-arming in earnest in 1937, became profoundly aware of its own self-image, and took steps to manipulate it. Its Press and Publicity Branch – first established in 1931, but expanded ten-fold in 1937 and 1938 – was responsible for launching a considerable press and publicity campaign surrounding the force's expansion. The Air Ministry saw public opinion as “uninformed” and malleable regarding the RAF, air power, and aerial warfare. They hoped to use this public ignorance to shape the image of the RAF and eventually encourage recruitment. Specifically, a 1938 report stated the aim of their publicity was: “to influence, and influence best when it takes advantage of sympathies and feelings already existing in those it seeks to influence.”¹⁷

The Press and Publicity Branch was charged with five critical functions: one, “maintain the prestige of the Royal Air Force as an efficient instrument of defence;” two, encourage recruitment of personnel; three, establish “general air-mindedness as an essential national asset in view of developments abroad and the importance of the air for communications and defence;” four, assist in the development of British civil aviation;

¹⁷ TNA Air 2/3959, RAFVR Expansion Scheme, “RAFVR: Report on Publicity December 1938.”

five, encourage the sale of British airframes and engines.¹⁸ The Air Ministry further demanded that all branches of the Air Ministry and RAF promptly inform the Press and Publicity Branch of any major developments to ensure that the public was quickly advised of advances made by the RAF.

The Air Ministry and the RAF saw their recruitment publicity task as so monumental that they had little choice but to “engage journalists in certain parts of the work.” The mainstream media, namely newspapers, the BBC, and the cinema, would form the main thrust of RAF publicity efforts, while political speeches, poster advertising, flying boat visits, and recruiting stands acted as secondary platforms. Though the Air Ministry put the greatest stock in newspapers, it felt that the cinema was “of ever growing importance and influence” and that everything should be done on the part of the service to further exploit a media that was capable of “reaching the vast

¹⁸ TNA Air 2/2812, Air Ministry, General, Press and Publicity Branch, Establishment, “Office Memorandum, Press and Publicity Branch” and various internal correspondence found in Air 2/2812. The Press and Publicity Branch was divided into three sections: the Press Section, the Information Section, and the Publicity Section. The Press Section was responsible for cultivating the RAF’s public image by channelling all communications from the service into the public sphere, including harnessing press depiction of RAF events like the RAF Air Day, visits to RAF air stations, and Royal visits. The Information Section monitored public and press responses to the RAF publicity measures. The Publicity Section was responsible for the service’s direct messaging to the public. They would issue publicity brochures and organizing exhibitions. Finally, the Publicity Section was also responsible for all “film questions,” and broadcasting, with the exception of training films. From 1930 to 1937 the Press Section of the Air Ministry was very small, only employing one head and four clerical officers. In 1937, the unit expanded to ten employees, and then to 23 by 1938. TNA Air 2/2812, Air Ministry, General, Press and Publicity Branch, Establishment, “Letter from Air Ministry to F. W. W. McCombe, Esq, H. M. Treasury, June 27, 1938.” The broader theme of the letter was the Air Ministry’s requesting additional funding for the expansion of their Press and Publicity Branch. Further correspondence between the Air Ministry and H. M. Treasury indicated that the Air Ministry saw the expansion of their Press and Publicity Branch as an absolutely vital element of their attempts to grow the service. The Air Ministry was also very concerned with promoting their strength overseas, especially in the United States. TNA Air 2/4039, Publicity: Press and Publicity Branch, “Letter from P. H. Maggs, Press and Publicity Branch, Air Ministry to E. B. B. Speed, H. M. Treasury, August 23, 1939.” The Air Ministry was still applying these priorities to their publicity measures until months before the outbreak of the Second World War. TNA Air 2/10210, Committees, Commissions, and Conferences: Committees named ‘P’ (Code B, 24/2): Publicity Committee, Minutes of Meetings and Progress Reports, “32nd Meeting of the Publicity Committee, May 25, 1939.”

masses at home and overseas.”¹⁹ To utilize the cinema for promotional purposes, the Press and Publicity Branch chose to target four separate elements: feature films, short (documentary) films, newsreels, and magazine films. The most successful element of this promotional scheme was newsreels. The only feature film released with RAF cooperation was *The Lion Has Wings* (1939), produced by Alexander Korda, but it was not released until after the outbreak of the Second World War. The Air Ministry and the RAF were ready to lend their full support to the production of another film, the American-made *The Shadow of the Wing*, including opening RAF air bases and allowing shooting at the Hendon Air Pageant and Empire Air Day; it was never completed due to MGM’s shifting priorities to other productions.²⁰

Only three short films *RAF* (1935) and the air defence films *The Gap* (1937) and *The Warning* (1939) were released, despite the Air Ministry’s belief that film could appeal directly to the public, especially young people.²¹ This was not, however, due to a lack of effort. In early 1939, both British Pathé and Gaumont British suggested that they make films specifically outlining the expansion of the RAF that would feature the production of aircraft engines, the training of personnel, and the assembly of aircraft. In the case of the Gaumont British proposal, they intended it for distribution in the United Kingdom, throughout the Empire, and to eighteen other (unnamed) foreign countries.

¹⁹ TNA Air 2/2812, Air Ministry, General, Press and Publicity Branch, Establishment, “Report of the publicity committee set up to consider and formulate proposals as to the publicity measures required in the interests of the Royal Air Force, civil aviation, and other branches of the Air Ministry, September 29, 1937.” The committee contained a number of prominent interwar RAF and Air Ministry figures, including two Air Commodores, one MP (Stuart Russell, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Under Secretary of State for Air), and J. M. Spaight.

²⁰ TNA Air 2/10210, Committees, Commissions, and Conferences: Committees named ‘P’ (Code B, 24/2): Publicity Committee, Minutes of Meetings and Progress Reports, “27th Meeting of the Publicity Committee, May 13, 1938.” Short, *Screening the Propaganda of British Airpower*, 5.

²¹ The Air Ministry estimated each long feature would cost at least £12,000, while shorts could be made for about £600.

Additionally, government screenwriters, who were working for the highly regarded Post Office (GPO) Film Unit, were also working on scripts for films to be shown in cinemas and in mobile recruiting vans. Despite the approval of Sir Kingsley Wood, the Secretary of State for Air, the films were never produced.²² The exact reasons are unknown, though it can be speculated they were cancelled because of the outbreak of the war.

Sir Kingsley Wood saw films and newsreels as “one of the best methods of publicity” for the RAF, a belief reflected in the frequency with which he appears in rearmament newsreels.²³ This belief is also reflected in Air Ministry policy papers. Newsreels, because of the breadth of their distribution, were “employed as fully as possible.” Until 1937, it was generally newsreel companies that approached the RAF to portray developments in the service in their issues. However, by 1938, the Press and Publicity Branch had decided to “take the initiative” in having the RAF appear in newsreels.²⁴ The RAF press and publicity branch suggested using pre-existing in-house

²² TNA Air 2/4038, Press and Publicity Branch Reorganisation, April 1939, “Publicity Committee, Progress Report no. 27, period ending 31st March, 1939.” TNA Air 2/10210, Committees, Commissions, and Conferences: Committees named ‘P’ (Code B, 24/2): Publicity Committee, Minutes of Meetings and Progress Reports, “Minutes of the Thirty-Second Meeting [May 1939]” The Air Ministry actually was trying to recruit Clark Gable to star in *The Shadow of the Wing*, but he was unavailable because he was shooting *Gone with the Wind*.

²³ Sir Kingsley Wood (1881-1943) served in many Cabinet positions, starting as Post Master General in 1931, and a member of Cabinet beginning in 1933. He was moved to Health 1935 (having previously served as Parliamentary Secretary for the Minister of Health between 1924 and 1929). Wood was moved to the Air Ministry in 1938, where he remained until 1940. At the Air Ministry he supervised the critical years of British rearmament in the air. Also in 1940, he was one of the Cabinet Ministers who helped push Neville Chamberlain out of office in favour of Churchill. Churchill rewarded Wood with 11 Downing Street. Wood remained Chancellor of the Exchequer until his death in 1943. He was replaced by Sir John Anderson, who had previously been in charge of ARP. Roy Jenkins, *The Chancellors* (London: Macmillan, 1999). TNA Air 2/3898, Photography and Cinematography, Purchase of recruiting films for use in mobile recruiting offices, “Publicity Committee, Minutes of Special Meeting, June 9, 1938.”

²⁴ TNA Air 2/2/2812, Air Ministry, General, Press and Publicity Branch, Establishment, “Report of the publicity committee set up to consider and formulate proposals as to the publicity measures required in the interests of the Royal Air Force, civil aviation, and other branches of the Air Ministry, September 29, 1937.” Included in these efforts was having newsreel companies and film companies use RAF, and War Office film facilities free of charge, and giving them access to RAF facilities.

instructional films for making newsreels.²⁵ The Air Ministry felt that newsreels would be of little value for recruiting enlisted men and officers at the local level (generally for employment on air bases), but did see them as being of great value for “general publicity.”²⁶ Some newsreel companies were willing to help the RAF promote the growth of the service, especially Sir Malcolm Campbell’s firm British Movietone which agreed to give its “whole-hearted support and assistance” to the RAF’s recruitment efforts. In fact, Campbell felt that newsreels were such an important way of conveying issues to the public that other newsreel companies should also be willing to offer the same support.²⁷

Showcases for the RAF: Hendon and other Air Pageants in British Newsreels

This section will explore how the RAF’s air pageants – namely the Hendon Air Pageant and Empire Air Days – would have appeared to British cinemagoers during the 1930s. These shows were the RAF’s chance to prove to Britons it was “second to none” and happily conveyed that message to the millions of cinemagoers during the 1930s.²⁸ Whatever the year, British newsreel companies were always sure to show viewers the size of the crowds – some sitting in large grandstands, others on the roofs of the cars –

²⁵ TNA Air 2/3804, Royal Air Force Expansion, Special Publicity Measures, “Royal Air Force Expansion 1938, Special Publicity Measures for the Recruitment of Personnel.”

²⁶ TNA Air 2/3959, RESERVE AND AUXILIARY FORCES (Code B, 66): R.A.F.V.R. Expansion Scheme: Press and Publicity Policy, Minute Sheet. The Air Ministry was already using newsreels to try to promote the growth of Imperial Airways. TNA Air 19/43, Press Relations, “Notes on the Duties of a Public Relations Officer to Imperial Airways Limited.”

²⁷ TNA Air 2/3804, Royal Air Force Expansion, Special Publicity Measures, “Note from Sir Kingsley Wood, Secretary of State for Air, June 24, 1938.”

²⁸ “Royal Air Force Pageant at Hendon” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, June 28, 1937).

that attended these shows annually.²⁹ In newsreel treatment of the crowds, there are some hints to the universal appeal of air shows to the British public. First, the size of the crowd in nearly every newsreel is absolutely massive; some reels shot the crowd from the sky to give a good sense of the size, while others openly estimated crowd sizes to be well over 100,000, sometimes as high as half a million.³⁰ Second, dignitaries, politicians, cabinet ministers, and foreign politicians were frequently, if not yearly, captured attending Hendon Air Pageants and RAF Empire Air Days.³¹ The Royal Family received particular attention, and newsreels covering air pageants made it a point to show their attendance. For example, in 1934 George V and Queen Mary were the “guests of honour” at RAF Bircham Newton where they were “obviously deeply impressed with the efficiency of this arm of the service.”³² Third, the middle and upper classes are also clearly well represented in Hendon’s crowd, based on the attire of many people watching and the hundreds of automobiles parked on the airfield grounds. Finally, newsreels also captured large numbers of working class people.³³

In their coverage of pageants, newsreels often tried to show the technological sophistication of the aircraft. Emphasis was usually placed on the sleek lines and metal

²⁹ “Thrills at Hendon Air Pageant” (London: British Movietone, June 27, 1932). In some cases, MPs were shown getting exclusive tours of RAF facilities and close inspections of RAF aircraft. “Empire Air Day Rehearsals” (London: British Movietone, May 15, 1939).

³⁰ “Royal Air Force Pageant” (London: British Pathé, 1934), “Gatwick Air Display” (London: British Pathé, 1938), and “Crowds Watch RAF Pageant” (London: Gaumont British, July 1, 1935).

³¹ Notable figures usually included the Prince of Wales, the Duke and Duchess of York, the Duke of Kent, Secretary of State for Air, Sir Kingsley Wood, Prime Ministers Ramsay MacDonald and Stanley Baldwin, and foreign dignitaries like King Feisal of Iraq. “Rehearsals at Hendon for RAF Display” (London: Gaumont Graphic Newsreels, 1929), “RAF Air Show” (London: Gaumont Graphic Newsreels, 1929), and “Rain the Spoil Sport” (London: British Pathé, 1933), “Pageant: RAF Pageant” (London: Gaumont Graphic Newsreel, January 1, 1931), and “Empire Air Day” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, May 30, 1938).

³² “Empire Air Day” (London: British Pathé, 1934). In 1937 the George VI along with Queen Elizabeth and the Duke and Duchess of Kent were honoured guests. See also “Royal Air Force Display at Hendon” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, July 15, 1929). Empire Air Days were mainly open houses at RAF bases throughout the country. “RAF Hosts Empire Air Day” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, May 25, 1935).

³³ “The Sky Their Stage” (London: British Pathé, 1932).

fuselages of newer planes such as the Hawker Hart or Demon. This was followed with narration that encouraged viewers to marvel at them.³⁴ Newsreel companies tried to replicate the experience of sitting in Hendon's grandstands by showing these aircraft in action. Normally, newsreel coverage would first emphasize the strength found in the unity of aircraft flying in formation and the "perfect precision and alignment" of RAF pilots.³⁵ This precision and alignment were almost always demonstrated by showing planes moving between formations, exhibiting the skill of RAF pilots and the reliability of RAF aircraft. Other reels showed planes doing flips and loops in the air, while other showed them flying in formation while connected by an elastic.³⁶ One newsreel indicated that only "superb" pilots could possibly conduct such a manoeuvre. The pilots' return to the field without breaking the ties was meant to be a signal of their precision and skill. Other newsreels featured what they depicted as the daring and bravado of parachutists.

There was a clear change in the tone of newsreel treatment of air spectacles after Hitler rose to power, and even more so after the remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936.

³⁴ "Musical Orders" (London: British Pathé, 1927), "Wonderful Flying" (London: British Pathé, 1927), "Air Manoeuvres" (London: British Pathé, 1929), and "Large Squadron of Royal Air Force Planes Practice for Pageant" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, June 21, 1937).

³⁵ "RAF Pilots Practice for Hendon Air Show" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, June 17, 1935), and "Royal Air Force Rehearses for Coronation Air Pageant" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, June 10, 1937).

³⁶ "RAF Pageant, Thrill of the Year 1928" (London: British Pathé, 1928), "For this Year's RAF Pageant" (London: British Pathé, 1929), "Proof of Reliability" (London: British Pathé, 1929), "Royal Air Force Display at Hendon" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, January 1, 1930), "Formation Flying Rehearsals at RAF Hendon" (London: Gaumont Graphic Newsreels, 1931), "Final Rehearsal for RAF Pageant" (London: British Paramount Newsreels, June 22, 1931), "The Sky Will be Full of Thrills" (London: British Pathé, 1932), "The Sky Will be Full of Thrills" (London: British Pathé, 1933), "Aerobatics Tied Together!" (London: British Pathé, 1933), "Linked RAF Planes Prepare for Hendon" (London: British Movietone, June 12, 1933), "Picture Paragraphs RAF Planes at Upper Heywood" (London: British Movietone, May 31, 1934), "Tied Together Drill at Hawkinge" (London: British Movietone, June 14, 1934), "DEFENCE: Parachute Display by Royal Air Force" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, May 14, 1935), "Rehearsals for RAF Pageant at Hendon" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, June 3, 1936), "RAF Practices for Hendon Air Pageant" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, June 29, 1936), "International Air Rally at Lypne" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, August 31, 1936), "RAF Pilots Rehearse for Empire Air Day" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, May 27, 1937), and "Planes Perform Aerial Manoeuvres" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, July 11, 1938).

What had once been an entertaining spectacle of British aerial mastery, air-mindedness, and imperial operations had become a demonstration of the skill and competence of Britain's air defences.³⁷ Beginning in 1934, newsreel coverage of the Hendon Air Pageant and Imperial Air Day took on a noticeably more defensive tone. They featured "simulated war conditions" in which bombers enter English air space only to be intercepted by the RAF. The bomber is able to shoot down one of the aircraft before continuing on its mission. Later, a barrage balloon is shot down to end the pageant. In the 1934, the air defenders in the pageant prove unable to protect Britain from the raider.³⁸ Similar simulations were repeated between 1935 and 1938.³⁹

Additionally, the Hendon Air Pageant also started to be portrayed as an important training opportunity for British aviators, rather than mere spectacle. Newsreel rhetoric surrounding the air display changed dramatically. In the early 1930s, newsreel dialogue tended to focus on the skill of the flyers and modernity of Britain's flying machines. However, by 1934, the commentary on the air pageant turned noticeably more nationalistic and militaristic, describing the RAF as "sky sentinels of Britain's homeland," guided by a "brief but glorious history."⁴⁰ The more militaristic tone of the Hendon Air Pageant continued until the outbreak of the Second World War. In 1935, the expansion of the RAF was said to raise public interest in the event, and the RAF was

³⁷ Between 1927 and 1939 the air pageants also featured displays that showed the importance of the RAF to the British Empire. They often featured, and sometimes culminated in the RAF destruction of an imperial enemy stronghold. In the late 1920s shows, the RAF attacked a distinctly Middle Eastern mock village using bombs and smoke. In each show, the enemies always surrender to the RAF, a force that was depicted as being inescapable.

³⁸ "RAF Air Pageant at Hendon" (London: British Movietone, July 2, 1934). The Mayor of London's son, Squadron Leader Collett, was killed in the 1934 Hendon Air Pageant in a crash. "Lord Mayor Attends Son's Funeral" (London: British Movietone, July 5, 1934).

³⁹ "RAF Rehearses Mammoth Flight" (London: British Movietone, June 21, 1937), "Aeroplanes Practice at Hendon for RAF Pageant" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, June 11, 1936), and "Air Display at Hendon" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, June 29, 1936). In other years, the RAF bombing display targeted what looked like oversized bowling pins.

⁴⁰ "Rehearsal for Pageant at Upper Heyford" (London: British Movietone, June 3, 1935).

depicted in a “more serious mood.”⁴¹ British Movietone described the 1936 pageant as a reflection of “the expansion of the Royal Air Force” that featured the “wonderful new machines with which the air force is being equipped.” Movietone’s treatment of Hendon in 1936 concludes with a declaration that the efficiency and discipline of the RAF will soon “be second to none.”⁴² The changing depiction of the Hawker Hurricane also shows the increased militarism in British newsreels. For example, the narrator in a 1936 newsreel notes that the planes were “powerful” and able to hold their formation like “a line of infantry.”⁴³

This idea matured in Movietone’s, British Pathé’s, and Gaumont British’s portrayals of the RAF at the 1939 Empire Air Day. In the newsreel coverage of Empire Air Day displays at Duxford, Gosport, and Northolt, the RAF is depicted as a formidable force: Blenheim bombers are shown as able to quickly penetrate an enemy’s airspace; Battle bombers fly in formation; Spitfires (now being produced in great numbers) demonstrate their capabilities as extremely effective interceptors; the Gaumont British newsreel actually noted how many bullets a Spitfire could unload in a minute. As with coverage of new aircraft development, the “mighty” RAF was depicted as a result of British technological sophistication, hard work, and ingenuity. The force was Britain’s best chance for peace in an increasingly unstable Europe. The reels also established some of the tropes that government messaging would invoke during the Second World War. The “little island” was cast as the underdog, reluctantly, but steadfastly, developing

⁴¹ “RAF Open Day at Hendon Air Base” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, May 27, 1935).

⁴² “RAF Pageant” (London: British Movietone, June 29, 1936).

⁴³ “Hurricane Fighters Rehearsing for Empire Air Day” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, May 16, 1936).

one of the most powerful air forces in the world.⁴⁴ In keeping with the aesthetics of modernism, the RAF of 1939 would have unquestionably appeared faster, stronger, and sleeker to attendees of the country's air shows.⁴⁵ The title card for Gaumont British coverage of the 1939 Empire Air Day (only three months before the start of the Second World War) simply read "Britain's Power in the Air." Rather than show the enjoyment the viewing public was getting from the open houses at RAF bases, the newsreel simply listed the MPs who were in attendance, and the aircraft on display. Some of the planes were described as being on the secret list and never before shown in public. In summary, by 1939 newsreel coverage of air shows and air pageants had nothing to do with entertaining the crowd, but everything to do with asserting the power of the RAF.

As noted in chapter three, aviation technology advanced significantly during the late 1920s and 1930s. Airframes shifted from wood and canvas construction to all metal, while engines became considerably more powerful. These technological advances were often featured in British newsreels, with companies devoting reels filled with nationalistic verve to Britain's aeronautical developments. Of particular interest was the development of monoplanes in the early 1930s, like the Vickers Jockey, though it was an otherwise unremarkable craft.⁴⁶ However, it was the Schneider Trophy that interested newsreel companies the most. The winning 1929 Schneider Trophy Team and its Supermarine S.6

⁴⁴ "Second Empire Air Day Featuring Aeroplanes and Parachute Jumpers" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, May 20, 1939), and "RAF Demonstration at Northolt Aerodrome" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, May 29, 1939). They also note some brewing criticisms of British foreign policy, specifically that the country had waited until the last possible moment to rearm.

⁴⁵ Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (New York: Penguin, 1988), David Harvey, *Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991), Stephen Kern, *Culture of Time and Space* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), Overy, "Heralds of Modernity," and Rieger, "Fast Couples: Technology, Gender, and Modernity in Britain and Germany during the 1930s."

⁴⁶ "Another Aerial Triumph for Britain" (London: British Pathé, 1932).

received lots of attention from newsreels.⁴⁷ Each of the shots (which are held for an extended time) appears meant to convey the aircraft's sleek lines, modern design and its speed. The cameraman also took the opportunity to draw direct contrasts between old and new technology, by juxtaposing the S.6 and ocean liners on Southampton Water.

The RAF, the Empire, and British Society in Newsreels

As noted earlier, the RAF became a critical and very cheap imperial policing tool during the 1930s. By the 1930s, British newsreel companies were reinforcing this *raison d'être* in the cinemas. Typical of interwar perceptions of aviation, the RAF was depicted by British newsreel companies as a service that could help police the empire, and project British power abroad.⁴⁸ In some cases, they overtly flew the flag as they arrived at far-flung designations, either conducting record-breaking flights, or mapping routes, and landing sites for Imperial Airways. Newsreel companies were present on the return of many of these flights and documented the greetings they received from high-ranking RAF and Air Ministry officials. On each of these flights, newsreel narrators were sure to

⁴⁷ "319 ½ MPH" (London: British Pathé, 1928) and "To Keep that Schneider Cup" (London: British Pathé, 1929).

⁴⁸ "Showing the Air Force Flag" (London: British Pathé, 1930), "Flying Boats of the 205th Squadron Leave for Singapore" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, January 17, 1935), "Our Navy of the Air" (London: British Pathé, 1937), "British Air Squadron Starts for Finland" (London: British Movietone, 1933), "RAF Flying Boats Off on Cruise" (London: British Movietone, 1937), "RAF Bid for Record" (London: British Pathé, 1938), "RAF Pilots Attempt Long Distance Flight Record" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, November 14, 1938), "Record-Setting English Pilots Honoured in Sydney" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, December 8, 1938), "Flying Boats at Pembroke" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, October 19, 1936), "Flying Boat Squadron for Mediterranean" (London British Movietone, September 20, 1937), "RAF Squadron 209 Leaves for Service in Malta" (London: Gaumont British Newsreel, September 20, 1937), "Seaplane Crashes in Singapore" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, February 18, 1935), "New Seaplane at Pembroke Dock" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, February 18, 1935), "Flying Boats Depart from Plymouth" (London: Gaumont Graphic Newsreels, January 1, 1927), "Britons be Proud" (London British Pathé, 1933), "Cheers All the Way" (London: British Pathé, 1933), "Record Breaking Flyers" (London: British Pathé, 1933), "RAF Flying Boats Leave for Australia" (London: British Pathé, 1934), and "RAF Flying Boat Singapore III Flies en Route to Singapore" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, July 25, 1935).

remind viewers of the extremely long distances the pilots had to traverse, sometimes over 1,000 miles in a single flight, and the newsreels always included shots showing the pilots in uniform, and contrasting the seaplanes with ships in harbour. Typically, RAF flyers were greeted with warm hospitality upon their arrival at imperial destinations, and even more so, when they returned from the long-distance flights. This was no clearer than when the RAF sent a squadron to attend the sesquicentennial commemorations of New South Wales in 1937, at the request of the Australian government. As the seaplanes were filmed leaving Plymouth, the narrator reminds viewers that Drake left Plymouth on his around the world voyage, and now the RAF was following in his footsteps.⁴⁹ When the RAF flying boats arrived in Australia they were said to be “bringing greetings from the mother country” as shots of them were spliced between images of a replica of Admiral Philip’s ship.⁵⁰

However, Movietone and Pathé newsreels showed RAF power as not just active, but also passive. As in Britain, the RAF put on air displays throughout the Empire. In 1933, King Ahmed Faud I of Egypt was treated to such an air display in Cairo. The air display included a number of RAF passes in tight formation. A year later, Faud’s son Farouk was treated to a similar pageant at Heliopolis. The Crown Prince, accompanied by Sir Miles Lampson, the High Commissioner for Egypt and Sudan, is shown keenly watching RAF aircraft conducting formation flying and supply dropping.⁵¹ In both cases,

⁴⁹ “RAF Flying Boats leave Plymouth for 30,000 Mile Tour” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, December 6, 1936). The newsreel mixed images of RAF officers in uniform with their Short S.8/8 Rangoons heading out to sea with the “good wishes of the empire.” “Flying Boat Takes Flight” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, July 24, 1939).

⁵⁰ “Advance Australia” (London: British Pathé, 1938). Referring to Admiral Arthur Phillip, the first Governor of New South Wales.

⁵¹ “RAF in Egypt” (London: British Movietone, February 23, 1933) and “Pageant Held Before King’s Son at Heliopolis” (London: British Movietone, May 3, 1934). The RAF was not just put on display for imperial monarchs abroad. Members of an Arab delegation were shown the prowess of the Hurricane at

the Egyptian monarchs toured the aerodrome and shook hands with British officials. The newsreels were also careful to document that RAF power was also on display to very large local crowds, in addition to the Egyptian monarchs. These newsreels appeared to be showing not only British technological mastery over the Empire, but also the complicity of its ruling classes. They also drew clear contrast between the technological sophistication of Britain, and its imperial possessions. Specifically, according to British Pathé: “once you pass east of Suez the Royal Air Force is a symbol of British Power.”⁵²

Newsreel depictions of the RAF in the Middle East more closely aligned with how the RAF’s role was depicted in air shows. In 1934, British Pathé published a series of three lengthy newsreels entitled “With the RAF in the Near East.” The first explores the RAF’s relationship with the local population by showing the local Assyrian and Kurdish troops enlisted to protect the RAF in Iraq on parade. The second shows the British Ambassador, arriving in Baghdad by air, with a large formation of RAF planes. As the formation passes over Baghdad, the narrator and the camera work draws a clear contrast between the ancient city and its modern European masters: “the magnificent display of the airmen...passed over the city of Baghdad, conjuring memories of the Kahlif.” The final newsreel shows British power in the Middle East more clearly. It highlights how the RAF uses armoured cars to protect its air bases from local rebels, find

RAF Northolt in June 1939. The narrator states that the delegation was “duly impressed with the expansion of Britain’s air force.” “Arab Delegates Meet RAF” (London: British Movietone, June 3, 1939).

⁵² “Hendon Air Pageant in Egypt” (London: British Pathé, 1934) and “Britain Keeps Watch in Sudan” (London: British Movietone, September 1, 1936). Other newsreels like “Air Pageant Practice” (London: British Movietone, June 14, 1937) demonstrated how the RAF could be used. This was particularly sensitive in Egypt, considering the country had enjoyed *de jure* independence since 1922, but was still under *de facto* British control. British newsreels also reminded British cinemagoers that large RAF transports could be used to rapidly transport troops throughout the empire in the event of an insurrection. Imperial monarchs, like the Emir of Kastina and King Amanullah of Afghanistan were given treatments when visiting Great Britain. “Emir of Kastina” (London: British Pathé, 1933) and “Royal Air Force Rehearsals for visit of King Amanullah of Afghanistan” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, January 1, 1928).

landing sites for RAF craft, and patrol the Iraqi desert. The narrator remarks that airplanes can patrol “250 miles from any civilized location.” As in Palestine and Transjordan, the RAF acted as not just an imperial policeman, but as key conveyor of the differences between civilized Britain and the uncivilized parts of the empire.⁵³

In 1936, Gaumont British Newsreels presented a story about the airplane’s ability to ferry troops in and out of combat areas. The message was clear: the RAF and the “most modern of transports” allowed Britain to control “those ancient monuments, the Pyramids and the Sphinx.”⁵⁴ A 1938 British Movietone reel displayed the fundamental role the RAF was playing in “maintaining order” in Jerusalem. It depicts the holy city as civilized and British controlled, but the desert beyond as “enemy country.” Only the RAF can venture over this dangerous territory and impose imperial control by searching for “Arab rebels in the hills and valleys” and “going into action against them” if needed.⁵⁵ The RAF’s role in Transjordan was depicted in a similar way. Near Amman, the RAF was shown by British Movietone to be playing a fundamental role in the pacification of the countryside, with the cooperation of armoured cars, and the Army. The newsreel also took the time to contrast the sophistication of the RAF and its paved concrete runways with the rebels and villages it was operating against.⁵⁶ Newsreels also depicted the RAF as fulfilling a similar role in Afghanistan. The RAF face “unceasing danger” as they bring civilization to people in mountainous Afghanistan who held “strong ideas on

⁵³ “With the RAF in the Near East,” 3 vols. (London: British Pathé, 1934).

⁵⁴ “Royal Air Force in Egypt” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, September 1, 1936). The camerawork mostly featured Ancient Egyptian ruins being shot from RAF airplanes flying overhead.

⁵⁵ “With the RAF in Palestine” (London: British Movietone, May 12, 1938).

⁵⁶ “RAF at Amman” (London: British Movietone, December 12, 1938).

torture.”⁵⁷ Thus, the RAF was depicted as the protector of Judeo-Christian civilization against uncivilized Muslims.

British newsreel companies clearly showed the RAF helping to bind British society together. The royals were depicted as being thoroughly airminded, deeply involved in and equally impressed by the Royal Air Force. Newsreel coverage from both British Movietone and Gaumont British of the King’s Jubilee Review of the RAF at Mildenhall airbase explores the intimate connection between the Monarch and “his air defence arm.” The narrator reminds viewers of their Majesties’ interest in the “most modern machines in the service.”⁵⁸ The King “wearing for the first time his uniform as chief of the Royal Air Force,” and escorted by both the Prince of Wales and the Duke of York, tours the airfield, which had nearly 400 aircraft on display, along with their crews. The crews seem genuinely interested in meeting the monarchs and their band enthusiastically played “God Save the King” when he arrived. Then the planes conduct a massive fly-over as the King and his sons watch, in the “greatest aerial review in Britain’s history in honour of our beloved King.”⁵⁹ When George V died, the RAF built a monument at Mildenhall. In his dedication remarks, Kingsley Wood stated, “the memory of George V is linked with the Royal Air Force.”⁶⁰ Edward VIII, who prided himself on being a modern man, had a similar relationship with the RAF (and aviation generally) during his brief reign. He received full honours from the RAF when he

⁵⁷ “On the Afghan Border” (London: British Pathé, 1934).

⁵⁸ “Their Majesties Pay Empire Air Day Visit” (London: British Movietone, May 28, 1934). Of particular interest, and political sensitivity, British Movietone presented a newsreel in 1932 of the Prince of Wales (Edward VIII) visiting Belfast. On this arrival to tour the new government building, Stormont, the Ulster Bombing Squadron escorts his airliner on arrival.

⁵⁹ “Royal Air Force Review” (London: British Movietone, August 7, 1935) and “George V at Inspection of RAF at Mildenhall” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, July 8, 1935). Gaumont British’s treatment of George V’s visit to Mildenhall was exceptionally long. On numerous occasions, both British Pathé and British Movietone show members of the Royal Family touring RAF facilities.

⁶⁰ “King George V Memorial at Mildenhall” (London: British Movietone, August 25, 1938).

inspected the RAF at Northolt, Mildenhall, and a number of other aerodromes in the summer of 1936. At each airfield, he inspected dutiful RAF officers and observed aerobatic displays.⁶¹

Beyond inspections, the royals participated in graduation ceremonies at Cranwell, the Royal Air Force College, on numerous occasions. In 1934, the Prince of Wales reviewed the cadets at their graduation ceremony. According to the newsreels, the members of the RAF were excited to see the Prince attend their graduation ceremony, and he was equally pleased to be present.⁶² Three years later, his brother Albert, now George VI, arrived at Cranwell by airplane to inspect the “future air leaders.” British Movietone was quick to remind cinemagoers that the King had once served at Cranwell, and now had a “personal interest” in the college. Again, the King received both a hearty welcome and send off from the RAF cadets.⁶³

Newsreels as the RAF Prepares for War

As early as 1933 British Newsreel companies were pointing to the need to rearm the Royal Air Force. A 1933 British Pathé newsreel called “The Year of the Monster” pointed to affairs in Japan, (newly) Nazi Germany, and Britain’s sputtering economic recovery as the impetus to rebuild the force.⁶⁴ A Gaumont British newsreel added considerable drama to the implementation of RAF rearmament Scheme C in May 1935, showing such notable cabinet members as Stanley Baldwin, Leslie Hoare-Belisha, Lord

⁶¹ “King Edward VIII Inspects the RAF at Northolt” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, September 7, 1936), “King George VI Inspects Royal Air Force Secret Planes” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, December 13, 1937). Philip Ziegler, *King Edward VIII: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1991).

⁶² “Prince of Wales at Cranwell” (London: British Movietone, October 15, 1934).

⁶³ “King Visits Cranwell” (London: British Movietone, January 31, 1938).

⁶⁴ “A Time to Remember – The Year of the Monster” (London: British Pathé, 1933).

Hailsham, Sir John Simon, and Lord Londonderry scurrying into Parliament. The newsreel went on to explain the massive increase in the size of the RAF: 920 more planes, 2,000 more pilots, 20,000 more personnel, discharged officers retained, and ten new training schools. It concluded that Britain has finally realized that “air preparedness is the surest guarantee for peace.”⁶⁵

By 1935, British newsreel companies were evoking the fear of aerial warfare, often using Nazi Germany, to generate public support for expansion of the RAF. They reminded British cinemagoers that because of Hitler’s aggressive policies the force had been required to “treble” in size and “restore Britain to the position she occupied in the air at the end of the war [the First World War].”⁶⁶ For example, a 1936 British Paramount newsreel appears to have been trying to drum up support amongst cinemagoers for Britain’s rearmament scheme by highlighting the rapid expansion of other forces in Europe. It showed that airplanes are now “first line of defence and attack,” with France, Germany, Italy, and Russia all having forces “one hundred times deadlier than the air forces of the Great War.” The reel then moved to show how Britain’s government and the country’s best engineers were responding to international threats by rapidly expanding the RAF.⁶⁷ Each of these points reinforced the reel’s statement that Britain is no longer an island.

⁶⁵ “Britain’s Air Power to be increased” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, May 23, 1935). Baldwin was called “the man of the hour,” in the absence of Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald. In fact, the transition from MacDonald to Baldwin was already nearly complete. Baldwin would become prime minister only two weeks later. Scheme C was an upgrade to the RAF’s first rearmament scheme (Scheme A) that was issued in the summer of 1934. Scheme C was drawn up to replace Scheme A because of Hitler’s blustering to Foreign Secretary John Simon about the growth of the Luftwaffe. Armitage, *The Royal Air Force*, 68.

⁶⁶ “Increasing the RAF” (London: British Movietone, May 27, 1935).

⁶⁷ “RAF Expansion Scheme Beating Timetable” (London: British Paramount Newsreels, September 3, 1936). Interestingly, the newsreel points to the importance of the airplane being fully realized in Russia, rather than in Germany or Italy. Another 1936 Gaumont British Newsreel pointed to the importance of

In 1938, Sir Kingsley Wood used Gaumont British, British Movietone, British Paramount, and British Pathé to appeal for “necessary” new recruits. In each services’ newsreels Wood called for a massive expansion of the RAF, including 2,000 pilots and a similar number of air observers. However, Wood’s emphasis was not on recruiting pilots, but airmen, of which he calls for 26,000 volunteers. He calls for skilled tradesmen, or men “willing to learn a trade” to “make their applications immediately.” According to British Pathé, the RAF had over 1,000 enquiries on the first day the newsreel appeared in British cinemas.⁶⁸ Wood continued to use newsreels to appeal to the British public in 1938 and 1939, when he cast an even larger net. In both years he made very similar appeals, calling for tradesmen and air observers, and up to 2,000 pilots; only the pilots needed to have a school certificate.⁶⁹ Wood requested that volunteers immediately apply to fill the 31,000 spaces created by the most recent wave of RAF expansion. He stopped short of requesting skilled tradesmen, and only asked for those willing to join.⁷⁰ According to Wood, the recruitment campaign in the summer of 1938 was a resounding success, with the RAF recruiting more men in the week ending July 18, 1938 than any other week in its history.⁷¹ The newsreel companies did more than merely show Wood’s speech to British cinemagoers. They mixed Wood’s speech with shots of the RAF in action: Hurricanes lined up on the ground or flying through the

government and taxes in helping to pay for the expansion of the RAF. “RAF Demonstrates New Aeroplanes” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, June 22, 1936). The reel also associated aerial expansion and aerial warfare with each country’s dictator, mixing images of bombers with Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin watching them fly in formation.

⁶⁸ “Royal Air Force Recruits Wanted” (London: British Pathé, 1938).

⁶⁹ “Sir Kingsley Wood Interview” (London: British Movietone, June 27, 1938).

⁷⁰ “Kingsley Wood Speaks about Air Force Expansion” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, June 23, 1938). Wood indicated that he felt the RAF expansion had the “approval of the whole of the country” and that the RAF was expanding with the “latest types” of aircraft.

⁷¹ “Air Minister Inspects RAF Recruiting Vans.” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, July 18, 1938).

air at great speed in formation, men working in RAF factories, and men in RAF uniforms assembled on the tarmac.

At the same time, newsreel companies also appealed to widespread unemployment amongst British youth, stating that “the problem of what to do with your sons should trouble parents no longer, for the air force will have room for the energetic and enterprising youth who is just obtaining manhood.”⁷² Newsreels were careful to emphasize the ease with which civilians could transition to life working in the RAF: “new drafts of the RAF direct entry observers prepare for their first rise in life...straight from civil life for training as observers to meet the rapid expansion of the Royal Air Force.”⁷³ With this in mind, the RAF and newsreel companies released fortnightly reels that explained how specific civilian occupations could translate into RAF service. For example: an amateur photographer in civilian life could become an aerial observer or an aerial photographer; a “keen sportsman” could become an observer; a garage hand could become an aircraft mechanic; a butcher boy could become a cook; a petrol pump boy could become a skilled flight rigger; a shop assistant could become an RAF equipment assistant; a fitter could become an aero engine fitter; and, an office worker could become a wireless operator. These reels would often end in an appeal to patriotism by asking men to let Britain’s possible enemies hear “the lion roar.”⁷⁴ The positions were

⁷² “Increasing the RAF” (London: British Movietone, May 27, 1935), “New RAF Recruiting Van” (London: British Pathé, 1937), “Mobile Recruiting Van” (London: British Movietone, December 20, 1937), and “Air Minister Inspects RAF Recruiting Vans” (London: Gaumont British Newsreel, July 18, 1938).

⁷³ “At School in the Air” (London: British Pathé, 1939).

⁷⁴ TNA Air 2/4038, Press and Publicity Branch Reorganisation, April 1939, “Publicity Committee, Progress Report no. 27, period ending 31st March, 1939.” Each of these reels started by showing a civilian doing their work, it would then cut to them conducting a similar task in RAF uniform, using RAF equipment, and then would conclude with the title “By Joining the RAF” with Hawker Hurricanes flying in formation in the background. The music playing was joyous and up-tempo. “England Introduces Conscription” (London: Gaumont British News, April 27, 1939), “Royal Air Force Training” (London: Gaumont British News, January 16, 1939), “RAF Training Can Improve Jobs Skills” (London: Gaumont

advertised as not only a way to serve the country in a time of crisis, but a well-paying one at that, offering £300 per year. At the same time, former members of the RAF, Royal Naval Air Service, and Royal Flying Corps were offered £45 to join the RAF reserve.⁷⁵ While the RAF did advertise positions throughout the service, it should be noted that the RAF did not appear to be using the cinema to recruit pilots. Yet, the majority of newsreel recruitment trailers featured positions that would allow the recruits to go airborne. They were careful to make non-pilot service in the RAF attractive by making it appear similar to that of pilots, and demonstrating that non-pilot recruits would have the chance to fly.⁷⁶

British newsreel companies also chronicled the training of new RAF recruits, helping to cultivate the image of the flyer and RAF enlisted man. Commonly, the cadets were shown hard at work in noisy workshops, working on aircraft engines, wings, fuselages, and other mechanical work. Cadets were also often shown drilling on the parade grounds, and practicing aircraft signalling. Newsreels made it clear that it was this sort of hard work that was needed to become members of the RAF, and these cadets training to work on the machines of the RAF were the “face of an airminded Great Britain.”⁷⁷ Many newsreels intended to encourage recruitment by showing the

British Newsreels, April 6, 1939), “RAF Recruiting Trailer” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, April 20, 1939), “RAF Recruiting Trailer” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, May 4, 1939), “RAF Recruiting Trailer” (London: Gaumont British News, June 1, 1939), “RAF Trailer” (London: British Movietone, (London: British Movietone, June 4, 1939), “Royal Air Force Recruiting Trailor [sic]” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, June 1, 1939), “RAF Recruiting Trailor [sic] Seeks Wireless Operators” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, March 9, 1939), “RAF Recruitment Broadcast” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, July 13, 1939), and “RAF Recruiting Broadcast” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, July 27, 1939).

⁷⁵ “From Civilian to RAF Observer” (London: British Movietone, January 1, 1939), “Join the RAF” (London: British Movietone, February 23, 1939), and “RAF Recruiting Trailer” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, May 18, 1939). In the reel appealing to former pilots to join the reserve, Gaumont British mixed images of old RFC and RNAS pilots marching with images of the new RAF. Clearly, they were attempting to tap into viewers’ sense of nostalgia. They also showed older RAF officers overseeing the training of new recruits, signalling that retired airmen might have a role if war should come.

⁷⁶ “Royal Air Force Training” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, January 16, 1939).

⁷⁷ “RAF Training Schools at Halton” (London: British Pathé, 1938).

harmonious juxtaposition of different segments of British society. Multiple newsreels transition from working-class men fabricating engines and drilling to would-be pilots engaged in the pursuits of the elites, like reading in the college's library, playing rugby football, or hunting foxes.⁷⁸ Aerial instruction also featured in British newsreels, with the implication that the British public still had a keen interest in the particulars of flight. The instructor and his pupils alike are steeped in class elitism and masculinity. They are all well groomed, in full flight gear, and have posh accents; they would have been indistinguishable from the stars of *The Dawn Patrol*.⁷⁹ In other newsreels, the camera work was sure to capture young British men in full flight gear as they run to their airplanes. As the threat of war increased after 1936, airmen were shown in training, placing bombs under the wing of an airplane, learning about the parts of a bomb, while pilot cadets were described as "the stuff Britain's defence is made of."⁸⁰

Not only were the men of the RAF portrayed as well trained, but they were also masculine, disciplined, and skilled. Numerous newsreels throughout the 1930s show RAF officers engaged in physical activity and calisthenics. In some, they are shown conducting basic marches and drills.⁸¹ In others, the entire focus was on the masculinity and fitness of RAF recruits. They are seen swimming, dancing, doing jumping jacks, running, and boxing as the RAF does everything it can to ensure viewers that their force is comprised of men who are of "perfect physical fitness."⁸² A 1936 newsreel from

⁷⁸ "Cranwell RAF College" (London: 1935), "RAF Officers in the Making at Cranwell" (London: British Movietone, February 2, 1935), and "Cranwell" (London: British Pathé, 1937).

⁷⁹ "Their Aerodrome their Class Room!" (London: British Pathé, 1929).

⁸⁰ "RAF Training Schools at Halton," "RAF Cadets" (London: British Movietone, 1938), and "Royal Air Force Trains Boys" (London: British Paramount Newsreels, April 4, 1938).

⁸¹ "RAF Physical Training Rehearsal at Uxbridge" (London: British Movietone, May 22, 1930), and "RAF Training Display at Halton 1939" (London: British Pathé, 1939).

⁸² "RAF Drilling Display" (London: Gaumont Graphic Newsreels, January 1, 1928), "Like One Man!" (London: British Pathé, 1932), "Royal Tournament Rehearsal" (London: British Pathé, 1934), and "Routine

Gaumont British is a good example of how the men of the RAF were portrayed in British cinemas. In it, airmen conduct a series of rigorous formation runs, while the camera occasionally focuses in on single airman who appears to be extremely fit.⁸³ Not only with technological but with physical prowess, the RAF was protecting Britain.

The airmen's discipline, undoubtedly on display to counter negative perceptions, was often reinforced by promotion of their flying skills. British newsreel companies frequently emphasized the skill of RAF pilots. For example, pilots demonstrating inverted flying were portrayed as making it look easy: "like all jobs well done, it looks much easier than it is."⁸⁴ Or, they would remind cinemagoers that "RAF planes don't often burn" when exploring the modern fire fighting services available at RAF Cranwell or RAF Northolt.⁸⁵ Pilots were shown engaged in dangerous tasks that could lead to fatalities, performing dangerous aerial or parachuting manoeuvres. British Pathé's narrator asks the viewers: "[who] would care to stand on the wing of a fast moving plane?"⁸⁶ From the number of newsreels showing wrecks of RAF aircraft, to numerous funeral processions shown in cinemas, British newsreel companies showed cinemagoers that the work of the RAF was dangerous and not for the faint of heart.⁸⁷ Some newsreels were overt in their praise of pilots' bravery: "a pilot must not only have amazing nerves,

and Fitness in the RAF" (London: British Movietone, May 10, 1939). In 1934, British Pathé referred to RAF rehearsals for the Royal Tournament as "an inspiring sight."

⁸³ "RAF Recruits Perform Physical Training Drill" (London: Gaumont British Newsreel, May 4, 1936).

⁸⁴ "Inverted Flying" (London: British Movietone, June 24, 1937).

⁸⁵ "Aeroplane on Fire in Northolt" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, February 13, 1936) and "Cranwell Firemen" (London: British Movietone, September 27, 1937).

⁸⁶ "Dare Devils of the RAF" (London: British Pathé, 1934), "RAF Members Killed in Airplane Crash Buried in Malta" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, February 25, 1935), "RAF Plane Crash at Hanworth" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, February 3, 1938), and "RAF Crashes at Hillingdon" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, February 3, 1938). Newsreels of RAF crashes were often fairly graphic.

⁸⁷ "Greater Love" (London: British Pathé, 1932), "RAF Squadron Gets Ready For Pageant" (London: British Movietone, May 25, 1933), and "Royal Air Force Fly in Battle Formation" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, February 10, 1938).

but phenomenal sense of judgement.”⁸⁸ The image of the aviator in newsreels, along with other films, stands in contrast to the arguments Francis has made regarding the public image of the flyer, and the images that appeared in First World War air films.

Not only was the staff of the RAF expanding, so too was its size and the quality of its fleet. As early as 1931, both Movietone and Pathé, issued newsreels featuring the latest developments in Britain’s war machines. British Movietone proudly reported they were the first company to capture the Gloucester Gauntlet on camera. Numerous bombers, from the Handley Page Hampden, to the Handley Page Harrow, Bristol Blenheim, and Vickers Wellington were introduced to the British public through newsreels. In each case, though newsreel companies often emphasized the classified nature of new aircraft, or their place on the “secret list,” to try to excite British cinemagoers, they presented random facts about the aircraft, such as their maximum speed and altitude, or details about their construction.⁸⁹ The Hampden, which only served as a bomber until 1942 due to heavy losses, was described as a “fine example of the aeroplanes which are being produced for the Royal Air Force.” The Harrow, which was demoted to transport duty before the end of the “Phoney War” of the winter of 1939-1940, was advertised as a “fearsome” aircraft, which British Movietone claimed could outperform many fighters and would make an excellent day bomber.⁹⁰ The Vickers

⁸⁸ “Drill in the Sky” (London: British Pathé, 1934) and “Royal Air Force Pageant” (London: British Pathé, 1934). In “Royal Air Force Pageant” British Pathé referred to RAF pilots as “steel-nerved.”

⁸⁹ “Fastest Bombing Squadron in the World” (London: British Pathé, 1931), “Daily Mail Plane for Royal Air Force” (London: British Movietone: November 14, 1935), and “Trial Flight of Wellington Bomber” (London: Gaumont British Newsreel, March 2, 1938). The Wellington was described as having geodesic construction, which would allow for more cargo space and bombs.

⁹⁰ “Christening the Hampden” (London: British Movietone, June 27, 1938), “Handley Page Harrow Bomber Unveiled” (London: British Paramount Newsreel, November 12, 1936), and “Christening of New Harrow Bomber” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, November 12, 1936).

Wellington was portrayed to be “probably the best bomber in the world,” while the Blenheim was claimed to be among the fastest.⁹¹

Other famous Second World War aircraft were also introduced to the public in newsreels. The Fairey Battle, which showed such promise as an interwar tactical bomber but was quickly removed from service in 1940 due to heavy losses, was portrayed as having the ability to fly like a fighter with a classified engine (the Rolls-Royce Merlin) that could push it to almost 300 mph.⁹² The Battle factory near Birmingham also served as a venue for Sir Kingsley Wood to promote the growth of the RAF and British rearmament. His speech at the factory stressed the importance of scientific research, particularly in aviation, and presented Britain as advancing in the field. A similar message was conveyed through a Gaumont British newsreel of Sir Kingsley Wood touring another airplane factory in Reading.⁹³ He reminded the workers that everyone was doing their part in Britain’s defence, and expanding the RAF. Their efforts, according to the reel, were a success, as monthly British aircraft production was increasing at a steady rate. Newsreels captured George VI touring aircraft factories at Weybridge and Cricklewood in 1936 and Rochester in 1939. The rearmament of the RAF, according to the Gaumont British newsreel, was not just preparing Britain to deal with emerging threats, but also providing employment for “thousands of British

⁹¹ “With the Royal Air Force” (London: British Movietone, January 5, 1939). Interestingly, the ostensible focus of this newsreel was supposed to be a visit of the Romanian Foreign Minister, Grigore Gafencu, to the air base. However, he is quickly lost in the coverage, and the focus quickly turns to the airplanes on display.

⁹² “New RAF Plane” (London: British Movietone, March 23, 1936) and “RAF Trials of New Fairey Light Bomber” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, March 10, 1936).

⁹³ “King George VI Tours Aircraft Works” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, December 13, 1937), “Sir Kingsley Wood Opens Aeroplane Factory Extension” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, January 30, 1939), and “King and Queen Visit Aircraft Works at Rochester” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, March 16, 1939).

craftsmen who would otherwise be workless” and even helping to stimulate the British motorcar industry.⁹⁴

British newsreel companies also celebrated the Hurricane, Hawker Aircraft’s most recognizable plane of the Second World War, during the 1930s. Movietone hoped the airplane would encourage men to “take up flying rather than take cover” because of the airplane’s tremendous manoeuvrability and speed (provided by its Rolls-Royce Merlin engine). British newsreel companies depicted the Hurricane as being central to Britain’s rearmament efforts in the air, showing new recruits that were being equipped with Hurricane fighters that could compete with aircraft of any other nation. One newsreel goes on to tell viewers that the Hurricane and aircraft like it were returning the RAF to its “old supremacy” which should “inspire a new feeling of confidence, the present state international politics being what it is.”⁹⁵ The King himself was impressed by the power of the still “secret listed” Hurricane as he toured the RAF depot at Northolt.⁹⁶ In an earlier visit to Northolt, he met what Gaumont British called the “RAF’s fastest pilot,” who had broken the record between Glasgow and London in a Hurricane.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ “Air Minister Inspects Aircraft Factory in Birmingham” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, July 28, 1938). The reel ended with a completely unrelated treatment of the Civil Air Guard, which was enlisting civilian pilots and airplane owners who could be pressed into service in time of war. The newsreel credits Sir Kingsley Wood for the development. As noted earlier, it is important to remember that the Civil Air Guard was by no means an inclusive organization, given the fees associated with entry, or the need to own an aircraft. “Kingsley Wood Visits the Fairey Aviation Company” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, October 27, 1938). The web source for this newsreel is incorrectly dated as 1928. This is not possible; Sir Kingsley Wood was not the Air Minister at the time, and Britain was not undergoing a rearmament scheme. For more on the close relationship between British science and military innovation see the work of David Edgerton, particularly *Britain’s War Machine* (London: Penguin, 2011), *England and the Aeroplane*, and *Warfare State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁹⁵ “Demonstration by 111th Fighter Squadron at Northolt” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, July 3, 1938) and “Hawker Hurricanes at Northolt” (London: British Movietone, July 3, 1938). The Hurricane first flew in 1935, entered service in 1937, and was the RAF’s primary fighter during the Battle of Britain. Production ceased in 1944, having been replaced by Supermarine Spitfire.

⁹⁶ “King at Northolt” (London: British Movietone, December 5, 1938).

⁹⁷ “King George VI Inspects the Royal Air Force at Northolt” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, May 12, 1938). The newsreel (the issue’s leading story) concluded with a flypast of twelve Hurricanes, engines

The Supermarine Spitfire, arguably Britain's most famous aircraft of the Second World War, received considerable fanfare from British newsreel companies when it was made public in 1938. The RAF issued almost four minutes of footage showing the Spitfire on the ground and performing a series of aerial manoeuvres for British newsreel companies. Each shot was meant to convey the speed and agility of the aircraft, one shot showing it buzzing past a slow-moving seaplane.⁹⁸ Gaumont British used the RAF footage to sensationalize the aircraft, telling viewers that its top speed was "secret" but they "can't be bothered to count after four hundred [miles per hour]." The newsreel goes on to tell viewers this record-breaker will enter regular service, forming the backbone of the RAF's expansion scheme, with the newly recruited pilots being assigned to fly it.⁹⁹ Later newsreels claimed that the Spitfire would be able to "keep open the sky routes of empire."¹⁰⁰ As fanciful and exaggerated as newsreel descriptions of the Spitfire (and less so the Hurricane) may seem, they certainly proved to be far more accurate when war did come in 1939, than newsreels forecasting the complete destruction of British cities by German bombers. In each of these cases, British technological mastery in the air was depicted as being one of the country's first lines of defence against growing international threats.

Only two weeks before the outbreak of the Second World War, a series of Gaumont British newsreels succinctly summarized the years of expansion and

roaring. The Hurricanes were also shot on the ground, as the lined up for take off. The music of the shot was meant to convey the majesty and strength of the RAF.

⁹⁸ "First Pictures of Vickers Supermarine Spitfire I and Speech by Sir Kingsley Wood" (London: British Paramount Newsreels, January 1, 1938).

⁹⁹ "RAF Spitfire Plane Manoeuvres" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, July 7, 1938).

¹⁰⁰ "RAF Massed Formation Flight over London" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, May 8, 1939), and "Royal Air Force Performs Mass Flight of Spitfires over London" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, May 15, 1939). One reel declared that Spitfires scrambling from Duxford aerodrome would be able to almost instantly intercept raiding enemy bombers, and then shoot them down in "less than half a minute." "RAF Spitfires Demonstrated at Duxford" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, May 8, 1939).

rearmament of the RAF. The newsreels covered two war games, one involving only the RAF and another that included the French Air Force. The first war game pitted the new bombers of the RAF (each of those mentioned above) against its brand new fighters to show Britain's power in the air "expanding beyond our wildest hopes." Each segment of the RAF was portrayed to be more than capable in their tasks. The bombers were met by "wave upon wave of fighters." In the second, the French Air Force attacked what the reel claimed was every major city in the United Kingdom with "giant waves of bombers." Yet, the RAF with its compliment of Hurricanes and Spitfires was more than capable of repulsing the enemies, forcing the raiders back over the channel where the RAF continued in hot pursuit.¹⁰¹ The rearmament of the RAF had made Britain stronger than "ever before in its long history." This strength, the newsreel goes on, will ensure that no enemy could successfully attack Britain, and by the same token, Britain could attack any potential enemy. The RAF's strength alone could move Europe towards a "real peace."¹⁰²

The RAF in Feature Films

This section will examine two films: one, the 1938 feature film *It's in the Air*, and the 1935 officially-sanctioned documentary film *RAF. It's in the Air* featured one of the period's biggest stars – George Formby – while *RAF* was the only government-sponsored film that made it to the screen before the outbreak of the Second World War.¹⁰³ The

¹⁰¹ "British Planes Deflect Raid on London" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, August 21, 1939).

¹⁰² "Royal Air Force Does Flight Exercises" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, August 14, 1939).

¹⁰³ Formby was immensely popular during the 1930s. He was among the biggest box-office draws during the 1930s, especially later in the decade. He was surveyed as one of the most popular actors in Britain. Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex. SxMOA1, Topic Collections: 17 Films, Bernstein Questionnaire, 1937 Report.

appearance of the RAF in feature films also conveys similar messages regarding the service: it was a dutiful, disciplined, and technologically advanced force that should be admired by the viewing public. The United States military, particularly the US Navy, had been using feature films throughout the 1930s and, according to Lawrence Suid, proved successful in shaping public opinion of the armed forces.¹⁰⁴

Even though Formby's 1938 film *It's in the Air* (entitled *George Takes Flight* in the United States) took his typical slapstick approach to humour, certain common images and themes surrounding aviation and the RAF appear in the film. From the film's opening with an aerial attack to its depiction of RAF officers, the film closely aligns with the service's desired public image. Formby's character, George Brown, is depicted as being curious about the RAF, and envious of its members, despite his early rejection by the service. Formby's travels as a fake dispatch rider lead him to an RAF air base where he encounters a number of RAF aircraft that he is clearly interested in. The RAF uniform acts as a focal point of his interest throughout the film. Upon first seeing it, Formby reacts with wonder, saying, "I wish I had a uniform like that!" Later in the film, Formby steals a uniform and says to his sister "I feel grand in one of these." Later, as he is masquerading as an RAF dispatch rider he expands his ruse and makes himself appear to be a pilot.¹⁰⁵ The notes on the film's script specifically state that Formby's character

¹⁰⁴ Lawrence Suid, *Guts and Glory: The Making of American Military Image in Film* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), xii & 43-54.

¹⁰⁵ *Film Weekly's* review of the film also notes the importance of the uniform, stating that George's character "longs" to wear one. Reviews of the film were generally positive. *Film Weekly*, January 7, 1939. *Film Weekly* said the film shows "George at his best," while *Kinematograph Weekly* said it was "box office certainty" and a "spectacular aerial extravaganza," with "irresistible slapstick gags." *Kinematograph Weekly*, September 15, 1938. *Kinematograph Weekly* also notes that the film's main point of appeal, beyond the star power of Formby and its comedic qualities was the "thrilling aerial adventure." The *Catholic Film Review*, said the film had "amazing stunt flying" and highly recommended it to its audiences. *Catholic Film Review*, February 1939.

should show special interest in these airplanes and that the film should elaborate on their sophistication.¹⁰⁶

The pilots in *It's in the Air* exemplify the characteristics typically attributed to aviators. The members of the RAF themselves are depicted as dutiful and highly skilled aviators. Numerous scenes show them being called to attention, marching, carrying out their duties, and landing an aircraft with tremendous skill. As in First World War aviation films, the officers' mess is established as the focal point of interactions and the construction of the pilot persona. The pilots share drink, sing songs, and cheer when Formby breaks into song with his signature ukulele. There are also a few scenes where RAF pilots acts as jokers, usually at Formby's expense. In the film's climax, Formby finds himself in the air alone and is brought down to a safe landing only with the coaching of the RAF. His ability to land the airplane secures himself a position in the RAF, to which he responds ecstatically, "You mean I can join the air force and learn to fly!"¹⁰⁷

Despite the film's strong pro-RAF stance, the Air Ministry and RAF felt it was inappropriate to offer support to the production of a comedy, likely a result of the scenes in the mess.¹⁰⁸ This, however, did not stop the RAF from taking advantage of the film's image through their publicity department. A large contingent from RAF Uxbridge, along

¹⁰⁶ *It's in the Air*, Film Script, BFI Catalogue S-128.

¹⁰⁷ Formby's comedic flight in *It's in the Air* closely resembles another thrilling flight that Britain's other leading comedy star – Gracie Fields – took in her film *Look Up and Laugh*, directed by Basil Dean (London: Associated Talking Pictures, 1935). In it she dons traditional pilot goggles, helmet, and scarf before going on a flight in an autogyro. Though very little of the film actually has anything to do with flight, the film's name and with it most of the promotional material focus on her three-minute flight in the autogyro. *Look Up and Laugh*, Press Book, 1935, BFI Library. Reviews of the film also note the film's highlight was the aerial conclusion. *Today's Cinema* November 24, 1942, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, December 21, 1942.

¹⁰⁸ TNA Air 2/10210, Committees, Commissions, and Conferences: Committees named 'P' (Code B, 24/2): Publicity Committee, Minutes of Meetings and Progress Reports, "26th Meeting of the Publicity Committee, April 26, 1938." The committee minutes did not specify why they felt the film was inappropriate for support.

with the RAF Band, members of the Air Council and Air Ministry attended the premier on Regent Street on January 16, 1939. The Press and Publicity Branch also set up foyer displays throughout the United Kingdom to coincide with showing of the film. The Press and Publicity Branch also arranged for airmen to attend the showing of the film at 83 different cinemas throughout the country.¹⁰⁹

While the RAF was not directly supportive of *It's in the Air*, they were fully behind an earlier attempt to put the force on the screen – 1935's *RAF*. Until 1935, the RAF was a “closed book” to British film companies and cinemas – despite American-made films that were portraying their armed services.¹¹⁰ From the outset, it is very clear the RAF intended the film to be recruitment piece. It sets about trying to draw in new recruits in three important, if unsurprising, ways: one, by demonstrating the camaraderie and professionalism of the men serving in the RAF (both the pilots and enlisted men); two, by highlighting the service's technological modernity; and three, by emphasizing the RAF's increasingly important role in maintaining the Empire and fostering British prestige. *RAF*'s director, John Betts, clearly had specific images in mind when crafting the film, all devoted to recruitment. They are also closely connected to the dominant images that appear in newsreels during the 1930s: one, the RAF was a young and elite force that men could be proud to join; two, it used technologically advanced equipment; three, it was vital to the defence of Great Britain and the Empire.

¹⁰⁹ TNA Air 2/4038, Press and Publicity Branch Reorganisation, April 1939, “Publicity Committee, Progress Report no. 27, period ending 31st March, 1939.”

¹¹⁰ As noted, the American armed services, especially the US Navy, were prominently featured in cinemas during the 1930s. There was also close cooperation between Hollywood and the US military. Farmer, *Celluloid Wings*, 100-111.

From the outset, *RAF* seeks to distinguish the RAF from the other service branches. It declares the RAF is “the youngest of the three services of the crown.”¹¹¹ Typical of a recruitment film, it immediately sets out to make the RAF appealing to British cinemagoers, particularly unemployed young men, just like newsreels of the period. The film focuses primarily on recruiting and the work of enlisted men, not just pilots, by emphasizing the important role of mechanics and skilled labourers: “they will become skilled engineers, capable of maintaining the aircraft and their engines.”¹¹² Cadets are shown working with engines, attentively listening to lectures, and working with diagrams of engines, wings and other aircraft components. The film also shows the same men drilling on the parade ground, proudly marching and wearing their RAF uniforms.

RAF is careful to sufficiently tempt potential enlisted men with the possibility (however remote) of becoming pilots. The narrator informs the audience that those who enlist and demonstrate considerable skill and promise will be selected to be enlisted pilots. This prospect is contrasted with the aura of elitism that is attached to pilot recruits in the film. Resembling a stately manor, Cranwell is noticeably more posh than the enlisted men’s training centre. According to the film, cadets are expected to remain in school for at least two years while they try to become pilots. The narrator explains the elite nature of RAF flyers: “that out of 100, only sixty are admitted to the Cranwell, for a determination that is no means standard.”¹¹³ The attitude of the pilots as they first don

¹¹¹ *RAF*, reel 1, 150 feet. 90 feet of 35mm film is equal to about one minute on the screen.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, reel 1, 250 feet.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, reel 1, 475 feet. The film emphasizes the RAF’s imperial role. One of the first flying recruits shown learning to fly is Indian, depicted wearing a turban with his flight gear, while all the other recruits are shown wearing caps. However, neither the narrator, nor the camerawork make any attempt to distinguish the Indian pilot from his classmates, beyond showing him comically struggling trying to get his long hair into his flight helmet.

their flight suits is very clear; each has a brimming smile as they get into their planes for the first time.

Not only are RAF pilots shown as Britain's elite warriors, but also as particularly masculine ones. Sport and physical activity are emphasized as vital elements of a pilot's training. The film mixes shots of recruits participating in vigorous physical activity: marching around a track, running, a tug of war, and hurdles. All are meant to convey the vitality, virility, and strength of RAF aviators. Interestingly, boxing, a popular sport in the British military, receives the most screen time.

As a result of their training, dedication, and masculinity, the RAF pilots eventually become capable aviators. The film clearly signals their transformation from dutiful cadets to interwar flyer-heroes. They immediately absorb some of the key characteristics of the flyer-hero. They are shown lounging in the grass with a dog near the hangars, they are in various states of readiness for their next flight, some are wearing flight gear and others are not. Despite their relaxed attitude, these men are shown to be Britain's alert guardians. In the air, they become the masters of modern aircraft (Hawker Furies) that are highly advanced and difficult to fly. These airplanes are, of course, perfectly capable of defending Britain against enemy bombers to the accompaniment (ironically) of Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries," the film shows the cadets carrying out various exercises in their Furies, from T-formations, pyramids, side by side, lines, and more elaborate loops – demonstrating their ability to repel enemy incursions. Though the aerial photography is quite impressive, it might have bored viewers who, by 1935, had become accustomed to films such as *Hell's Angels*, *Ace of Aces*, and *The Dawn Patrol* (1930).

The film's treatment of night flying and parachuting serves as a blatant attempt to use the technology and novelty of flying to try to entice recruits to the RAF. It shows that pilots are taught to fly their aircraft in low visibility or at night by using hoods that are fitted over top of the windscreen – completely obstructing their view. The segment of the film that discusses parachute training is quite lengthy. Still, the film uses this opportunity to show once again the viewers the cooperation between enlisted men and pilots, and the important role enlisted men play in the RAF. As the film narrates the importance of parachutes for the fighting airmen, it shows enlisted men being instructed on how to prepare and pack pilots' chutes. The cadet officers demonstrate their faith in the work of their enlisted men taking their packed chutes, and using them for parachute practice.

RAF reserves its strongest messaging for the sequence showing the strength of British bombers. The music, which to that point had been upbeat and inspirational, adopts a more foreboding tone while two large bombers are wheeled out of their hangars. The crew first swagger to their bombers that carry “a heavy load of bombs” and represent a “formidable opposition.”¹¹⁴ This is reinforced by the image of the bombers passing over an idyllic English village. Clearly, this section of the film serves a dual purpose: first, to demonstrate to the British public that their air force too is capable wreaking the destruction they so fear; second, as a warning to foreign powers.

The film also pays considerable attention to the airplane's importance in naval warfare and defending the Empire. It explores the daily operations of aircraft carriers and the difficulty pilots have landing and taking off from a ship. It also explains the airplane's numerous roles in naval warfare: reconnaissance, defence, bombing and

¹¹⁴ Ibid., reel 1, 700-1050 feet.

torpedo attacks. The torpedo bomber gets particular attention, with multiple shots of torpedoes appearing on screen. Also of importance are flying boats, which the film depicts as being essential to the maritime defence of the United Kingdom. It stresses their usefulness against enemy submarines, a point that would not have been lost on people with memories of the Great War.

The film reminds viewers of the RAF's imperial policing role, directly supporting Satia's claims about the panoptic nature of the RAF in a desert setting: "since the aeroplane is able to penetrate areas of terrain inaccessible [sic] to other forms of transport, it is no wonder that the RAF is being used more and more as the first weapon in disputes."¹¹⁵ Not only can the RAF penetrate the distant spaces of the Empire, but it can do so in great numbers; one of the first shots of the RAF on assignment is over the Pyramids and the Nile. Betts wastes no time explaining to viewers what is meant by force as the film shows the RAF's proficiency with aerial bombs: "in the desert most planes carry bombs and pilots are trained to drop them."¹¹⁶ Additionally, the RAF is shown providing transport and logistical support to the army.

Indeed, according to *RAF* the force had become the single most important element of the British Empire's continued presence in the Middle East. The imperial section of *RAF* ends with a warning to those who would resist the British Empire: "tribes can longer attempt raids and get away with it, along this coast, the RAF sees all."¹¹⁷ Again, Betts juxtaposes this commentary with images of RAF aircraft flying over the Pyramids at Giza and the suggestion the disaster at Khartoum in 1884-85 would have not occurred if the RAF had been in service. The clearest imagery in the director's repetitive showing of the

¹¹⁵ Ibid., reel 2, 825 feet.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., reel 2, 900 feet.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., reel 2, 1300 feet.

RAF's omnipotence is the shadow of an airplane whisking across the desert before it reaches a local village. The film's visuals match its narrative about the strength of the RAF and its overall theme: Britain's (in this case the Empire) future is in the air.

Reviewers in *Monthly Film Bulletin* and *Sight & Sound* were surprised to find *RAF* released in cinemas, but were equally disappointed in the film. By their own admission, British film critics had "high hopes" for a film that highlighted the service. They felt, in *Sight & Sound's* estimation, that the RAF was a subject that could not help but "bring an audience to its feet with enthusiasm."¹¹⁸ However, they felt the film fell completely flat, and was nothing more than an awkward and blatant recruitment piece. The *Monthly Film Bulletin* saw the film for what it was, but was still able to recommend it for its thrilling aerial and parachuting sequences. *Sight & Sound*, however, felt given aviation's "inherent" excitement, the film did not go far enough. Worse still, they claimed that director John Betts had more or less forgotten to drive home the point that Britain's future was in the air. Not only was it lambasted for its weak story telling but also poor production values, notably the poor and inconsistent narrative and poor sound quality. This semi-official attempt to provide Britons with a cinematic story of their RAF pilots fell well short of expectations.

Conclusion

The RAF expanded rapidly in the second half of the 1930s. The extent to which cinematic recruitment efforts aided in that growth is nearly impossible to effectively assess. It was likely the case that RAF recruitment took care of itself, given the level of air-mindedness in Great Britain. Comprehensive scholarly research on the growth of the

¹¹⁸ *Sight & Sound* 4 no. 14 (Summer 1935), 78.

service in the 1930s still needs to be done. What is clear, however, is that the RAF that appeared on British cinema screens during the 1930s tightly aligned with the image the Press and Publicity Branch of the service was hoping to advance. To a cinemagoer, the RAF convincingly appeared as a modern and dedicated service whose pilots and enlisted men were willing and able to defend both Britain and the Empire from foreign threats. Showing them what they were being defended from was up to Britain's biggest science fiction writer and later their own government's Air Raid Precautions. How aerial destruction was portrayed on the screen will be discussed in the next three chapters.

Imagining the Apocalypse:
H. G. Wells's *Things to Come*

“War Comes to Everytown: Death and Destruction from the Air.”

– *Things to Come*, British promotional material, 1936

Things to Come was by far the most famous, grandiose, and hyped British film of the 1930s. H. G. Wells penned the screenplay, adapting his book *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933) to the screen. Not only was it written by one of England's most famous writers, it was produced by England's preeminent filmmaker, Alexander Korda. It is arguably the most significant British-made film during the interwar period.¹ The film has been widely recognized for its stunning visuals, modernist set design, and scientific forecasting. Regarding aerial warfare, as Susan R. Grayzel notes the film has become “a touchstone for shaping how the growing threat of air power was imagined and discussed.”² However, to date, little scholarly attention has been paid to the central role the airplane and aerial warfare played in it, despite its encapsulating “many contemporary ideas about the use of the airplane and the role of the aviator in modern society.”³ The film's plot moves almost entirely on aeronautical events, from the destruction of British civilization by enemy (presumably German) bombers to its later salvation by airmen;

¹ Michael Coren, *The Invisible Man: The Life and Liberties of H. G. Wells* (Toronto: Random House, 1993), 189, and Richard Hauser Costa, *H. G. Wells* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), 125.

² Susan R. Grayzel, “A Promise of Terror to Come,” 58.

³ Michael Paris, *From the Wright Brothers to Top Gun*, 105.

additionally, the movie's key characters are airmen. The critical messages of the film (endorsement of social control, state planning, and progress, along with the condemnation of war) are conveyed through issues and actions surrounding aviation.

This chapter will focus on the place of the airplane and aerial warfare in *Things to Come*, focusing on its writing and production, the film itself, and its reception. This discussion will build on the arguments of chapters three and four to highlight how aerial warfare was sensationalized on the British screen. Ultimately, as with other films of the period, British film critics accepted its portrayal of aerial warfare.

The Writer and Source Material

Even though his celebrity was starting to wane by interwar period, H. G. Wells and his utopian visions continued to be hugely influential with the British public. Even George Orwell, who was usually critical of Wells's visions for the future, felt that few writers influenced more young people in Britain than Wells.⁴ Current writers have also hailed him, as did his contemporaries, as one of the most influential visionaries of all time, the culmination of which was the 1933 book *The Shape of Things to Come*.⁵ While he tried to maintain that the book was not a political manifesto, his prescription for solving humanity's problems is outlined clearly: socialism, world government, technocracy,⁶ rationality, simplicity, and evolution.⁶ When it was published in 1933, Wells insisted that cheap versions be printed, so that it could reach the largest possible

⁴ John E. A. Busch, *The Utopian Visions of H. G. Wells* (London: McFarland, 2009), 10. For more on Wells's visions for the future see: Patrick Parrinder, *Shadows of the Future: H. G. Wells, Science Fiction, and Prophecy* (London: Liverpool University Press, 1995), J. James Simon, *Maps of Utopia: H. G. Wells, Modernity, and the End of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), and Don Smith, *H. G. Wells on Film: The Utopian Nightmare* (London: McFarland, 2002).

⁵ Busch, *The Utopian Visions of H. G. Wells*, 10.

⁶ Jeffery Richards, "Things to Come and Science Fiction in the 1930s" in *British Science Fiction Cinema*, edited by I. Q. Huxley (London: Routledge, 1999), 16.

readership.⁷ Like the rest of his later work, *The Shape of Things to Come* has a darker tone than earlier writings, as his optimism for the future had faded with repeated political and economic crises during the 1930s.⁸

Wells wrote *The Shape of Things to Come* partly as a response to Fritz Lang's iconic film *Metropolis* (1927). Part of Wells's objection to *Metropolis* was the film's simplicity and its lack of exploration of technology's future potential.⁹ Specifically, Wells felt the film needed to make more use of helicopters and modern aviation technologies. Also in contrast with Lang, Wells believed that machines would free human beings rather than subjugate them.¹⁰

H. G. Wells was fascinated with flight; the airplane was central to his visions of the future, his protagonists were often flyers, and flying often appeared as a theme in his writing. This is reflected in both his writing and his personal life, to the point where Leon Stover called the airplane Wells' "favourite symbol of purposive integration."¹¹ One exception to Wells's early optimism was his 1909 book *The War in the Air*.¹² The book, which features a Zeppelin force attacking the United States, neatly summarizes Wells's vision of aviation: "and now the whole fabric of civilization is bending and

⁷ David C. Smith, *H. G. Wells: Desperately Mortal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 324.

⁸ Antonia Vallentin, *H. G. Wells: Prophet of Our Day* (New York: John Day, 1964), 227.

⁹ H. G. Wells, "Review of *Metropolis*," *Times* (London), April 17, 1927.

¹⁰ Leon Stover, *The Prophetic Soul: A Reading of H. G. Wells's Things to Come Together with His Film Treatment, Wither Mankind?*, (London: McFarland, 1987), xv. Though it is ruthlessly critical of *Things to Come* and provides analysis void of historical contextualization, Stover's book provides a thorough and effective overview of the film.

¹¹ Wells took his first flight in an airplane in 1912 with British aviation pioneer Claude Graham-White. Stover, *The Prophetic Soul*, 47. According to Peter Kemp, "the enthusiasm" shown by Wells's characters toward aviation in his books was "very much his own," that Wells had "an insatiable appetite for flying." Peter Kemp, *H. G. Wells and the Culminating Ape* (New York: St. Martin's 1982), 166.

¹² H. G. Wells, *The War in the Air*.

giving, and dropping to pieces and melting in the furnace of war...The German air-fleets sweep across the scene, and we are in the beginning of the end.”¹³

Later, Wells’s fascination with flight (and for that matter his firm belief in state planning) was on display during his visit to the Soviet Union in 1934. His memoirs mention the “patchwork of aerodromes” that dotted the Russian countryside and the “many hundreds of planes” that were swirling around the fields, or on the ground. He felt that their progress in the air was a clear example of the strides made by the Soviet Union during the interwar years. In fact, Wells noted that the world he had envisioned in 1909’s *The War in the Air* had been realized in the Soviet Union.¹⁴ Wells had a similar respect for Hitler and his regime’s abilities to harness the energy of its people. Still, the violent tendencies of these regimes sapped any support Wells might have directly offered them.

The Shape of Things to Come represents a synthesis of Wells’s ideas about the future. It predicts a world financial crisis that would ultimately lead to social dislocation, political unrest, and ultimately war. Wells predicted the start of a world war – fought mostly in the air – within ten years (guessing 1940 instead of 1939), war in the Pacific, the rise of a Soviet bloc in eastern Europe, and Nazism controlling western Europe. Groups of aviators would maraud enemy cities, inciting panic and chaos. The war would be destructive like no other, and lead to the emergence of atomic weapons. However, Wells stretched too far in his forecast by arguing the war would result in a new global order that would replace the liberal democracies with a socialist world government ruled by enlightened technocratic airmen. Wells’s new world order is a “cold, clinical terrifying police state” that gasses all who resist, including the Pope, and rigidly controls

¹³ Ibid., 434.

¹⁴ H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography: Discoveries and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1934), 799.

the lives of people under their authority. Orwell took exception to the benevolent air dictatorship that is promoted in *The Shape of Things to Come* and ultimately the film version *Things to Come*. He concluded that, regrettably, Wells was naïve in thinking that totalitarian regimes could be benevolent.¹⁵

Wells believed firmly in his vision. A version of the film's first script appeared in a BBC Radio broadcast on January 9, 1934, entitled "Whither Britain?" In it he warned Britons against the dangers of nationalism and advocated that the only solution to the world's problems would be found through establishing a worldwide government. Indeed, *Things to Come* would become the best-known example of internationalist propaganda in Britain during the 1930s.¹⁶ In the broadcast, Wells specifically referred to aviation as something that needed to be internationalized to protect humanity.¹⁷ The idea of an international military air force was not unique to Wells. In fact, since the late years of the First World War, it had received much attention from British military thinkers, philosophers and politicians.¹⁸ Such figures as Rudyard Kipling and Lord Robert Cecil had floated the idea of international organizations controlling the world's air power. The most prominent British air power theorists including P. R. C. Groves, Frederick Sykes, and L. E. O. Charlton, along with some pacifist thinkers such as Clement Atlee and Bertrand Russell, advocated the creation of an international air force.¹⁹ The most

¹⁵ Patrick Parrinder in Stover, *Prophetic Soul*, foreward.

¹⁶ Holman, "World Police for World Peace." Internationalism in Europe was not limited aviation or Great Britain. See Elisabeth Van Meir, "The Transatlantic Pursuit of a World Engineering Federation," *Technology and Culture* 53 no. 1 (January 2012): 120-145. World government was a centrepiece of Wells's visions for the future. For recent work on world government see Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: A History of an Idea* (New York: Penguin, 2012).

¹⁷ Christopher Frayling, *Things to Come* (London: British Film Institute, 1995), 19.

¹⁸ Holman, "World Police for World Peace."

¹⁹ The idea of an international air force was not universally accepted by British thinkers and military theorists. J. M. Spaight, J. F. C. Fuller, Lord Allenby, George Orwell, and Aldous Huxley all opposed the

prominent of these plans, put forward by Noel Baker in 1934, closely resembles Wings Over the World – an air force meant to monitor the peace, and impose it using force if necessary.²⁰ Though some of these thinkers would become disillusioned with the idea of international air force, Wells remained devoted to it – and to world government more generally – well into the Second World War.²¹ The correlation between the international air force and Wells’ notion of world government demonstrate the technocentrism of not only Wells’s thoughts on international affairs, but also some British intellectuals.

Production and Promotion

The Shape of Things to Come was not the first Wells tale to be made into a feature film. Wells had a deep interest in and love for the cinema. *The First Men in the Moon* (1919), *The Invisible Man* (1933), and *Island of Lost Souls* (1933) had all been made into feature films before *Things to Come*, with Wells playing a large role in the script writing. Wells saw film as the twentieth century’s most important medium and art form, both for education and entertainment.²² Nevertheless, typically of motion pictures, all of Wells’s

idea, most believing that no government would ever hand over so much power to an international organization.

²⁰ Noel Barker, *Disarmament* (London: L. Hogarth, 1927) cited in Holman, “World Police for World Peace.”

²¹ Wells, *The Common Sense of War and Peace & Guide to the New World* (London: Penguin, 1940). Wells claimed World War II was the “greatest opportunity” to create a world state. He believed that technological developments like aviation and radio had finally shrunk the world to the point where world government was possible. At the same time, Wells felt that the airplane had become so powerful the only way to effectively control it would be to keep it under the control of a world government. “H. G. Wells on the War! Prepare for World Revolution,” *Sunday Dispatch*, July 25, 1941, “The Greatest Opportunity the World has ever Had,” *Sunday Dispatch*, August 24, 1941, “A Russian Writes to Mr. Wells,” *Manchester Guardian*, July 7, 1942, and “The New World: Mr. Wells’s Dazzling Prospects,” *Manchester Guardian*, January 16, 1943. As we will see in the film, there is a discrepancy in Wells’s vision of the future. He advocates for a world government, yet is staunchly nationalistic. In *Things to Come*, Wings over the World is based in Basra, Iraq, but is composed of entirely Britons.

²¹ Frayling, *Things to Come*, 19.

²² Anthony H. West, *H. G. Wells: Aspects of a Life* (New York: Random House, 1984) and Stover, *The Prophetic Soul*, 30. This is just one of many comparisons Stover draws between Wells, the airmen, Lenin, and the Soviet Union.

film adaptations were produced with the profitability of film studios and the entertainment of audiences foremost in mind; *Things to Come* proved to be different. Seeing the screen adaptation of *The Shape of Things to Come* as one of his most important films, potentially his most influential film, Wells was especially enthusiastic and extremely controlling during production. As a result he was even more involved in the production of this film than any other, to the point of controlling the critical elements of production.

Alexander Korda met with Wells shortly after the publication of *The Shape of Things to Come* and asked to collaborate with Wells on making a film version.²³ Korda, despite his initial enthusiasm, almost immediately regretted the cooperation with Wells and the creative control granted the author.²⁴ Wells penned two scripts of the film before Korda and William Cameron Menzies, the American director, finally agreed to do the picture. Korda rejected the first scenarios, feeling they were too didactic and ideological to be successful, even though some of the most radical elements had been toned down. Obviously, a major film studio had no appetite for presenting an anti-corporate message, let alone for messaging that could to alienate a large number of cinemagoers, particularly in the potentially lucrative American market. London films also vetoed Wells's plans to give audience members a programme at each showing of the film that would outline the key arguments made by the film. Despite the considerable blunting of its message, many of the film's critical elements remained and the final product lacks subtlety or nuance.

²³ Frayling, *Things to Come*, 19. For more on Korda see: Charles Drazin, *Korda: Britain's Only Movie Mogul* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 2002), Karol Kulik, *Korda: The Man Who Could Work Miracles* (London: W. H. Allen, 1975), Martin Stockholm, *The Korda Collection* (London: Boxtree, 1992).

²⁴ Keith Williams, *H. G. Wells, Modernity and the Movies* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 106.

The overbearing tone of “propaganda for the Wellsism and the modern state movement,” as Leon Stover has put it, would be a hindrance at the box office.²⁵

As a military advisor Wells hired celebrity military theorist Basil Liddell Hart, a role Liddell Hart happily accepted.²⁶ The importance of selecting Liddell Hart as the film’s military advisor cannot be overstated. Brian Bond, an eminent historian of the British armed forces and a biographer of Liddell Hart, has argued that Liddell Hart’s career “in terms of both renown and influence” reached its peak in the four years before the Second World War.²⁷ He was writing a column for the *Daily Telegraph* on military affairs, giving him unparalleled influence and reputation in the British public sphere. Additionally, he was connected to high-ranking officials in the Army and the War Office, to the point where he was able to formulate his own opinions based on up to date information and influence British military policy. Though he remained largely focused on land warfare and grand strategy theories, Liddell Hart was a consistent champion of improving Britain’s air defences and the increasing importance of the airplane to warfare. As early as 1925, he felt that the airplane would unleash horrifying casualties and crush popular morale in the event of another war.²⁸ He held this position throughout the 1920s and most of the 1930s.²⁹ Liddell Hart borrowed much of his early ideas about aerial warfare from J. F. C. Fuller, the British armour theorist and prominent member of the

²⁵ Stover, *The Prophetic Soul*, 58.

²⁶ King’s College London, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (KCL LHC), Liddell: 13/59, Letter from London Film Productions to Basil Liddell Hart, April 14, 1934. H. G. Wells’s Film “Wither Mankind.” March 4, 1934, and KCL LHC, LH2H/36/1-37, Letter to Max Hammerton, Esq, August 30, 1979. Liddell Hart was a declared fan of H. G. Wells’s “prophetic gifts.”

²⁷ Brian Bond, *Liddell Hart: A Study of His Military Thought* (London: Cassell & Company, 1977), 88.

²⁸ Liddell Hart, *Paris, or the Future of War*, 41-42.

²⁹ See also Basil Liddell Hart, *Europe in Arms* (London: Faber & Faber, 1937), and Basil Liddell Hart, *The Defence of Britain*.

British Union of Fascists.³⁰ Liddell Hart's belief in the airplane's apocalyptic powers waned after the experiences of the Spanish Civil War, the development of radar, and improvement of air defences. However, at the time of his work on *Things to Come*, Britain's leading military theorist of the twentieth century believed aerial warfare would spell doom for civilization.

Liddell Hart made numerous suggestions, though only a selection made it to the screen. Included in the scenes that did not make it into Menzies's and Wells's final version were his expanded images of naval and land warfare. Specifically, Liddell Hart intended his scenes on naval warfare to show how the airplane would make the battleship obsolete in future wars and how tanks would be able to cross terrain and outflank enemy armies at tremendous speed. Had these scenes made into the film, British cinemagoers would have had a clear preview of the carrier war that would define the Pacific theatre and the blitzkrieg that became synonymous with armoured tactics during the Second World War.³¹ As will be seen, Liddell Hart's most expansive and sensational additions were left for the attack on Everytown in the film's first sequences.

Korda's frustration with Wells continued into 1934 when shooting began. Wells made himself a daily nuisance on the set. Despite his lack of experience in filmmaking, he exercised considerable influence over the production, working with Arthur Bliss on the score, along with overseeing editing and set designs.³² Raymond Massey (who played both John and Oswald Cabal) called Wells a "control freak" in his autobiography

³⁰ Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 593.

³¹ KCL LHC, Liddell: 13/59 Letter from London Film Productions to Basil Liddell Hart, April 14, 1934. H. G. Wells's Film "Wither Mankind." March 4, 1934.

³² Coren, *The Invisible Man*, 194 and Frayling, *Things to Come*, 19.

and complained, “no writer for the screen ever had or ever will have such authority.”³³ For example, Wells “stormed and raged” over what he saw as Menzies and Korda’s inability to bring his story to the screen.³⁴ Wells also had included a stipulation that absolutely no changes could be made to the film without his consent, leaving little doubt he left his mark firmly on the final product.

The other critical players in the production besides Wells and Alexander Korda were his brother Vincent and William Cameron Menzies. Vincent Korda took control of the production design for the film and worked closely with American director William Cameron Menzies and set designer George Perinal. Menzies and Wells frequently disagreed on set. Wells openly lamented Menzies’s decisions and called him “incompetent,” even though Alexander Korda specifically chose him because of his abilities as a “visualizer.”³⁵

London Films used two distinct marketing campaigns to promote the film. One angle focused on futurism, the film’s expense, and its importance to the British film industry, while a second focused on aerial destruction and the airplane. The former targeted largely bookstores, high street shops, and cinema lobbies, while the latter tried to reach a broader audience in newspapers. Each potential advertising venue tried to exploit the film’s unprecedented and unique futuristic aesthetic – the overall theme of the film’s press book. For example, tie-ins at bookshops and music shops focused on the buildings in *Everytown 2036*, while advertising programmes intended for clothing stores focused

³³ Raymond Massey, *A Hundred Different Lives* (London: Book Sales, 1983).

³⁴ Valentin, *H. G. Wells: Prophet of Our Day*, 282.

³⁵ Later in his career Menzies would prove himself to be a first-class art director and production designer, vindicating Korda’s choice. Given the extremely visual nature of the film (at the expense of both character development and narrative flow), Menzies abilities as a visualizer seemed a natural fit, despite Wells’s thoughts to the contrary.

on the futuristic clothing worn by the actors.³⁶ The press book also contains a number of posters that London Films recommended to cinemas looking to promote the film. Like the lobby displays, boards and placards designed for retailers, the posters focused on the futurism and modernism of the film, particularly the cityscape, architecture, vehicles and clothing. Additionally, they focused on the futuristic sets, the space gun and even the moon. However, as Leon Stover argues, the advertising exaggerates the modernity of the film.³⁷

The British film press's consensus review of the film appears to have accepted this line of marketing. Dozens of film reviewers are quoted in the press book exclaiming the extravagant and expensive film's impact on the British film industry.³⁸ Aubrey Flanagan's review in *Cinema* is a good example:

Wellsian prophetic spectacle, magnificent and unparalleled study of devastation of modern glimpses of war and prophetic glimpses of world of tomorrow. An epic achievement in everyway, which makes film history.³⁹

The reviews of the film emphasize its uniquely British nature (despite its American director) and its importance to the British movie industry. The promotion of *Things to Come* as a British cinematic achievement came at a time when the British film industry was falling behind American competition and worries about the Americanization of British culture (through the cinema) were becoming more acute.

³⁶ BFI Special Collections, Press Book, *Things to Come*.

³⁷ Stover, *The Prophetic Soul*, xvi. By his own admission, Stover is not fond of Wells' vision of the future. He is extremely critical of what he sees as Wells' Saint-Simonian vision of a future that is intensely state dominated. He calls the film "nothing more than a crude prophecy of space flight derived from Jules Verne."

³⁸ Some of the quotes used include: "There has never been anything in the cinema like *Things to Come*," C. A. Lejeune, the *Observer*; "the most important film yet made in this country. I congratulate the producer on making our best film yet," Connery Chappell, *Sunday Dispatch*; "the most remarkable feat in British film history," Cedric Belfrage, *Daily Express*; "A miracle of modern screencraft, *Things to Come* presents screen spectacle which beggars description. Gigantic scenes grip the attention. The production moves in a mighty sweep of spectacle impossible to describe," Ernest Fredman, *Daily Film Renter*; and Sydney Carroll in the *Sunday Times* declaring "it makes film history."

³⁹ BFI Special Collections, Press Book, *Things to Come*.

Despite the prominent role that aviation and aerial warfare play in *Things to Come*, they were not used as a promotional angle in the shop and cinema lobby tie-ins recommended by London Films. Given the pervasiveness of aerial warfare in British culture during the 1930s, this is especially noteworthy.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, flying did make a limited appearance in some promotional posters that feature images of an airplane streaking across the typeset, while others contain aviation scenes in the background. The image of John Cabal (Raymond Massey) emerging from his black monoplane WT-34 in a black spacesuit is prominently featured.

Like high street promotion, general newspaper material also paid attention to modernity as it appears in the picture and its “invisible star,” H. G. Wells.⁴¹ However, the destruction of Everytown in 1940 and John Cabal’s *Wings of the World* formed the bulk of the promotional material generated for use in British newspapers. Presumably, these promotional angles would also have constituted the majority of promotion that an average Briton would have been exposed to, given the wide circulation of newspapers. The most recommended tag-line in London Films’ prepared press matter was “War Comes to Everytown: Death and Destruction from the Air.” Other recommended tag-lines included “graphic realism of *Things to Come*,” “order out of chaos,” “great spectacle in *Things to Come*” (in reference to the aerial attack), and “Wells and the Next War, as shewn [sic] in *Things to Come*.” The press matter, like reviews of the film, emphasized the realism of the aerial attack. One fabricated news story focuses entirely

⁴⁰ Other recommended tag-lines for the film included: “What is the world coming to?” “One Man has the daring to predict, One man to produce,” “From 1936 to 2036, A century of amazing happenings,” “H. G. Wells Prophetic film spectacle,” “A spectacular film of the future,” “The Woman of the future – will her problems be the same of those today?” “Follow the fortunes of a family through a century of unrest to a new world,” “One man wanted war – one man wanted peace – the woman wanted the winner.” BFI Special Collections, Press Book, *Things to Come*.

⁴¹ General Press Matter, *Things to Come*, London Films, 1936, BFI Special Collections.

on aviation, highlighting how the people of Everytown are bombed without warning and their civilization destroyed, only to be saved by

A man with a new type of aeroplane. He is the chief of the airmen, a group of idealists who have founded a colony away from the scene of war and who are determined to put an end to hostilities. A squadron of giant aeroplanes follow and bomb the ruined city with harmless gas bombs, putting everyone to sleep. The airmen take possession of Everytown and begin the work of reconstruction.⁴²

It appears that London Films felt the most effective way to market to the largest segment of the British public was to emphasize the air attack and the destruction of Everytown.

The Film

After its lengthy and expensive production, *Things to Come* finally premiered at the Leicester Square Theatre on February 21, 1936, and continued to show five times daily until March 3, 1936.⁴³ All told, the film cost somewhere between £250,000 and £300,000, making it by far the most expensive British-made film to date.⁴⁴ The final version of the film is divided into three distinct acts: the aerial attack on Everytown; the medieval conditions in post-apocalyptic Everytown and the rescue of Everytown's residents by *Wings over the World*; and Everytown in 2036 after *Wings over the World* have established a technocratic dictatorship. The film ends with *Wings over the World* asserting the importance of technology and modernity.

The first act of the film begins with a busy city street, undoubtedly meant to represent Piccadilly Circus.⁴⁵ People of all classes merrily Christmas shop, oblivious to the warnings of impending aerial warfare printed in newspapers and written on sandwich

⁴² General Press Matter, *Things to Come*, London Films, 1936, BFI Special Collections.

⁴³ *Times*, February 21, 1936 to March 3, 1936.

⁴⁴ Frayling, *Things to Come*, 16.

⁴⁵ Stover, *The Prophetic Soul*, 2.

boards. Indoors, three of the film's lead characters John Cabal (Raymond Massey), Dr. Harding (Maurice Braddell), and Pippa Passworthy (Edward Chapman) discuss the threats of the enemy leader (Hitler is alluded to) along with the possibility and consequences of war.⁴⁶ On Wells's instructions, the set designers included a painting of a Douglas DC 3. This was intended to establish aviation's importance to the film and to the ideals of the Cabal character.⁴⁷ Ultimately, the Air Dictatorship of the future will be built around them. Cabal, an amalgam of a number of different characters from the book, is the key protagonist, the strongest voice of reason, and staunchest proponent of technology and world civilization. He warns of the cataclysm to come and how air war will destroy everything if it is unleashed again.⁴⁸ As the film progresses, Cabal and his progeny will become the flyer-heroes who would have been so familiar to viewers in 1936.

Progress – one of the film's most important themes – is carried and measured by aviation, but more specifically aerial warfare.⁴⁹ For example, Cabal and Passworthy debate war's relationship to progress. Passworthy contends that it stimulates progress and that the last war (the First World War) was not all that bad. Cabal argues that things have changed because of the airplane: "if we do not end war, war will end us."⁵⁰ A

⁴⁶ *Things to Come*, produced by Alexander Korda, London Film Productions, 2 Minutes. Wells originally intended for the war scares and sequences to only feature aviation. H. G. Wells, *Wither Mankind? A Film of the Future by H. G. Wells based on his two books, The Shape of Things to Come and The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind*. BFI Script: 6235.

⁴⁷ The production notes for the film called for a large propeller to be installed above the mantelpiece. Instead, the illustration of the DC 3 is present. Also, the DC 3 first flew in December 1935, making it relatively new when the scene was shot. Williams, *Wells, Modernity, and the Movies*, 112. Overy, "Heralds of Modernity," 54. Overy has argued that upper middle class professionals, particularly engineers and industrial designers are particularly important to modernity.

⁴⁸ Stover, *The Prophetic Soul*, 31. Stover contends that Wells saw democracy and fascism as interchangeable, both were the products of the same problem: capitalism.

⁴⁹ Rebecca Bell-Metereau, "The Capital Shape of Science Fiction Heroes to Come," in *Cinema and Modernity*, ed. Murray Pomerance (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 111.

⁵⁰ *Things to Come*, 6 minutes.

stronger political statement about the destructiveness of aerial war and political extremism had been written into the script, but did not make it on to the screen:

My god. If they've attacked without a declaration of war. Then it's vengeance. No quarter – vengeance. Punishment or else the end of civilization all together. But it's just possible there's some mistake, you know. I cling to that. If not then it's war to the knife. No it's not war. It's extermination of dangerous vermin. A vermin without pause or pity.⁵¹

On screen, the airplane is about to do more than bomb a city; it is about to destroy Western civilization.

The attack on Everytown is as impressive as anything on screen during the 1930s and a “superbly staged air raid, a graphic and chilling illustration of Stanley Baldwin’s dictum.”⁵² From the outset, Wells emphasized that the attack should come exclusively from the air, while the actual details were the work of Liddell Hart.⁵³ The characters learn of the attack – which is remarkably similar to Wells’s 1909 novel *The War in the Air* – huddled around a radio. John Cabal, however, remains stoic, telling his wife “life must carry on, why should we surrender life to the brutes and fools?”⁵⁴ He embodies the popular notions of the flier: the powerful and cold-blooded warrior.⁵⁵ His stoicism is contrasted with a 90-second montage showing the worsening chaos in the streets.⁵⁶

On the recommendations of Liddell Hart, the government is shown hastily preparing Everytown for the attack: anti-aircraft guns are established, gas masks are

⁵¹ BFI Special Collections, *Things to Come*, Release Script – Post-premiere cuts, BFI Script: S6255.

⁵² Richards, “Things to Come and Science Fiction in the 1930s,” 19. Richards is referring to “the bomber will always get through.” John E. A. Busch, *The Utopian Visions of H. G. Wells*, 55.

⁵³ *Wither Mankind?* Wells wrote in the script, “just air war.” KCL LHC, Liddell: 13/59. Basil Liddell Hart’s Correspondence on with H. G. Wells, Notes on Script for H. G. Wells’s Film “Wither Mankind.” March 4, 1934.

⁵⁴ *Things to Come*, 9 minutes.

⁵⁵ While there has been plenty of scholarly work done on the masculinity of aviators in a broad context, there is a surprising lack of analysis of British aviators. Martin Francis signals in his book *The Flyer* that the uniform is the “most enduring symbol” of the aviator. Francis, *The Flyer*, 23.

⁵⁶ Williams, *H. G. Wells Modernity and the Movies*, 112. Williams likens the scene to an Eisenstein picture. Though it is not quite as effective, the scene reminds viewers of the Odessa steps sequence from *Battleship Potemkin*, directed by Sergei Eisenstein (Moscow, 1925).

distributed, trucks with loudspeakers tell to people to return to their homes, and other civilians take refuge in Underground stations.⁵⁷ Despite the preparations, large explosions suggest the destruction of entire city blocks and the deaths of hundreds, as other residents are shown fleeing and clambering over each other trying to escape both explosions and gas.⁵⁸ As was the case with Wells's political statements, the brutality of the attack was toned down from his original versions.⁵⁹ Remarkably, not a single airplane is ever seen. This terrifying scene was scripted, shot, and put on the screen more than a year before the intense bombing raids at Guernica, Madrid, and Barcelona really captured the British imagination.⁶⁰

The film then moves to an aerial battle that depicts a mass of enemy bombers flying over the White Cliffs of Dover. The image of airplanes flying over old England en masse could have been drawn from Le Corbusier's 1935 book *Aircraft* (originally published in French as *L'Avion*).⁶¹ The importance of Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris, also known as Le Corbusier, is hard to overstate. He was initially consulted on the film by Vincent Korda, but eventually walked away from *Things to Come*.⁶² More broadly, he was a tremendously important artist, architect, and designer. He was "the most celebrated and the most criticised architect" of the twentieth century, helping to define

⁵⁷ KCL LHC, Liddell: 13/59. Basil Liddell Hart's Correspondence with H. G. Wells, Notes on Script for H. G. Wells's Film "Wither Mankind." March 4, 1934.

⁵⁸ Stover, *Prophetic Soul*, 30. Ironically, the movie theatre explodes first. Stover argues this was Wells's way of indicating his discontent for the cinema still being used to merely entertain, rather than educate.

⁵⁹ Coren, *The Invisible Man*, 195. *Things to Come*, 14-17 minutes.

⁶⁰ Frayling, *Things to Come*, 32. This montage was meant to also include scenes of various capital cities throughout the world laid to waste, but it was not included in the film version.

⁶¹ Frayling, *Things to Come*, 62. Le Corbusier, *Aircraft* (New York: Studio Publications, 1935). *Aircraft* contains a number of images of cities, rural areas, old fortresses, and coastlines from the air.

⁶² Williams, *H. G. Wells, Modernity and the Movies*, 110.

the urbanist and modernist architectural movements.⁶³ These two movements had a tremendous influence on the design of cities and buildings after the Second World War.⁶⁴ Fittingly, Le Corbusier placed great significance on the airplane. In *Aircraft*, he argues the airplane now had terrifying and dangerous implications, but could still be a central measure of progress and modernity:

The airplane is the symbol of the new age. At the apex of the immense pyramid of mechanical progress it opens the New Age, it wings its way into it. The mechanical improvements of the fierce preparatory epoch – a hundred years' blind groping to discovery – have overthrown the basis of civilization thousands of years old. Today is in front of us: mechanical civilization, the reign of the new age. The airplane, in the sky, carries our hearts above mediocre things. The airplane has given us the bird's-eye view.⁶⁵

However, the imagery used in *Things to Come* is especially impressive and menacing; it is meant to drive home the country's new vulnerability to the bomber.⁶⁶

The film then shifts to a duel between Cabal and an enemy aviator, whom Cabal eventually defeats. Both attractive and well-groomed pilots are wearing standard flight gear: leather jacket and helmet, with goggles – the stereotypical flyer-hero.⁶⁷ In an act of camaraderie, Cabal lands next to the aviator he has just shot down and pulls him from the burning wreckage of his aircraft. Poison gas starts to spread around them and Cabal shares his spare gas mask with his enemy, until a young English girl arrives. The enemy demands Cabal give the girl the extra gasmask: “I've given plenty to others, why should I

⁶³ Michael Raeburn and Victoria Wilson, eds., *Le Corbusier: Architect of the Century* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1987), 7.

⁶⁴ Nicholas Fox Weber, *Le Corbusier: A Life* (New York: Knopf, 2008).

⁶⁵ Le Corbusier, *Aircraft*, 6-13.

⁶⁶ This shot combined with shots of the White Cliffs of Dover from the air, reinforcing the idea that they offer no defence against the airplane.

⁶⁷ *Things to Come*, 19 minutes. The duel, which was filmed over Brooklands Race Track, Surrey, is creatively shot. The camera was mounted on Cabal's wing and remains fixated on the monoplane, creating a sense of speed, agility, and altitude. Stover, *The Prophetic Soul*, 38.

not have some myself. I dropped the gas on her, maybe I've killed her father and mother, maybe I've killed her whole family.”⁶⁸

The film continues to hinge on flight in its second act: Everytown in post-apocalyptic 1970. It provides the key difference between those who are civilized (the technocratic air dictatorship Wings over the World) and those who are not (the flightless Chief). Everytown has been completely ruined by the air attack and its inhabitants are now diseased and impoverished.⁶⁹ The film engages in a lengthy exploration of aviation to demonstrate how far Everytown has fallen after the world war. A Mussolini-inspired feudal warlord, known as the Chief, rules Everytown.⁷⁰ In order to keep his control of the city, he maintains a constant state of war and stifles any technological or economic development, except aviation. He plans to use aviation to subdue Everytown's enemies in Britain's hinterlands. However, Everytown's leading scientist, Richard Gordon (Derrick de Marney), is frustrated by his inability to get Everytown's Avro 504s back into the sky: “nothing will ever fly again! Flying is over! Everything is over! Civilization's dead!”⁷¹ This theme is reinforced a few minutes later, when a woman

⁶⁸ *Things to Come*, 20 minutes. Wells's early scripts were even more didactic than this scene.

⁶⁹ The people are suffering from the wandering sickness, which was more prominent in *The Shape of Things to Come* than it is in the film version. Wars followed by plague and then the creation of a world state were common in Wells' visions for the future. Additionally, the world state is more often than not imposed by alien overlords (either otherworldly or foreign) on primitive people. See also *The War of the Worlds* *The War in the Air* (1908), *The World Set Free* (1914) and of course, *The Shape of Things to Come*. Mark R. Hillegas, *The Future as Nightmare: H. G. Wells and the anti-Utopians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 60-62. In his script for the film “Wither Mankind?” BFI Script 6235, Wells emphasizes the ruins must appear on the screen. The ruins act as symbols of decay and destruction and further highlight gap between civilizations. Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle, eds., *Ruins of Modernity*. (London: Duke University Press, 2010), 2, Johannes von Moltke, “Ruin Cinema” in *Ruins of Modernity*, 409, and Kim Newman, *Apocalypse Movies: End of the World Cinema* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1995), 35.

⁷⁰ Williams, *H. G. Wells Modernity and the Movies*, 113 and Frayling, *Things to Come*, 23. The resemblance of the barrel-chested Chief to Benito Mussolini was so uncanny that *Il duce* banned the film in Fascist Italy. The British Union of Fascists also picked up on the deliberate attempt to make the Chief seem like Mussolini. *Action*, February 21, 1936.

⁷¹ *Things to Come*, 27-31 minutes. BFI Special Collections, *Things to Come*, release script, post-premiere cuts, BFI Script S6255. A version of the Avro 504 was actually the principle trainer used by the Royal

reports an aircraft sighting. He explains that “flying is finished, we should never get in the air again!” and “we’ve gone back too far, flying has become a lost skill.”⁷²

Just as Gordon proclaims the death of flying and civilization, the sight of an airplane revitalizes him and the people of Everytown. Only the backward Chief shows any sign of worry at the sight of the airplane. The excitement only builds as John Cabal – the personification of Wells’s faith in progress and technocracy – emerges from the plane. The messianic undertones of Cabal’s arrival are hard to miss.⁷³ His appearance is striking: he is wearing a black, tightly fitting uniform, with pointed shoulders, and a very large domed helmet. However, the costume designer duly includes leather gloves: though he might appear to be from the future, Cabal is a pilot. He proclaims to the Chief that he and Wings over the World represent the last hope for civilization; their modern technocracy has taken control of the air and the seas in the name of forming a world government. Acting as a sort of aeronautical Platonic Guardians, they intend to bring reason and science back to Everytown, using force if necessary. Like the RAF’s behaviour in the Middle East during the 1930s, Modernity is brought through aerial warfare, violence, and oppression.⁷⁴

Flying Corps and Royal Air Force during the First World War after 1917. It is not known if the filmmakers deliberately chose trainers as the type of plane the Chief was trying to get into the sky.

⁷² *Things to Come*, 31 minutes.

⁷³ Stover, *The Prophetic Soul*, 55. Stover likens Cabal to more than a mere messiah; he is also a judge. von Moltke, “Ruin Cinema,” 411. Jennifer Davis Roberts, *Norman Bel Geddes: An Exhibition of Theatrical and Industrial Designs* (Austin: University of Texas, 1979)

⁷⁴ Paris, *Warrior Nation*, 168 and Satia, “The Defence of Inhumanity.” Darko Suvin, “Introduction” in *H. G. Wells and Modern Science Fiction* ed. Darko Suvin (London: Associated University Presses, 1977), 17, and Busch, *The Utopian Visions of H. G. Wells*, 5. Leon Stover argues Cabal should be likened more to Lenin than other figures: “Where Lenin only promised world revolution, John Cabal delivers it.” Stover, *The Prophetic Soul*, 1. Wings over the World truly is the embodiment of the twentieth century’s modernist project. They seek to bring state planning, homogenization, science, reason, organization, order, truth, and industry. For more examples of works on modernity see: Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, Susan Stanford Friedman, “Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism,” *Modernism/Modernity* 8 no. 3 (September 2001): 493-513, Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*,



Illustration 5: John Cabal, pilot-saviour in perhaps the most famous still from *Things to Come*.

The relationship between the Chief and Cabal revolves around aviation, from the Chief demanding airplane parts in their first meeting to Cabal's repeated warnings that the Chief is no match for Wings over the World.⁷⁵ The relationship is meant to highlight the differences between the primitive warlord and the modern flyer. This is also reinforced through conversations between Rowena (Margaretta Scott), the Chief's female companion, and Cabal, the first "real aviator she has seen."⁷⁶ Cabal repeats his warnings

Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

⁷⁵ *Things to Come*, 42-48 minutes and Bell-Metereau, "The Capital Shape of Science Fiction Heroes to Come," 116-117.

⁷⁶ Bell-Metereau, "The Capital Shape of Science Fiction Heroes to Come," 116.

that Wings over the World and their “new airplanes” will end the Chief’s dictatorship, no matter how much he postures.⁷⁷

The contrast of the winged-modern and the flightless-primitive is continued at Wings over the World’s headquarters in Basra. Wings over the World, whose pilots are dressed in the same black uniform as Cabal, possess a fleet of massive monoplanes.⁷⁸ As Christopher Frayling points out, this was almost certainly based on the “By Air Tomorrow” chapter in Norman Bel Geddes’s 1935 book *Horizons*.⁷⁹ Norman Bel Geddes was an important modernist industrial and stage designer during the interwar period. The designers of the film, particularly Vincent Korda, seem to have been especially influenced by Bel Geddes’s Airliner Number 4. Nigel Tangye, the aeronautical advisor for the picture, felt he was designing a futuristic airplane that fit with the “logical” pace of aeronautical development.⁸⁰ Like the Basra Bomber, Airliner Number 4 was to be an impressive feat of engineering and would have been much larger than Howard Hughes’s “Spruce Goose.” The design, which Bel Geddes argued could be implemented with already existing technology and industrial practices, would be twenty-three times larger than the Dornier Do X, the largest aircraft in the world at the time.⁸¹ Perhaps with even more insight, Bel Geddes claimed that intercontinental aviation in an aircraft of this sort had the ability to change the entire structure of the world. Bel

⁷⁷ *Things to Come*, 48-53 minutes.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 53 minutes.

⁷⁹ Frayling, *Things to Come*, 64. The BUF’s aviation reporter, “Blackbird,” praised the bombers depicted in the film. *Action*, October 10, 1936, 10.

⁸⁰ Nigel Tangye, “Things to Come,” *Action*, October 24, 1936, 8.

⁸¹ The aircraft was designed to weigh over 569 tons, have a wingspan of 528 feet, and be 235 feet long; it would carry 606 passengers and crew, most with sleeping accommodation; and it would be propelled by twenty-six 1,900HP engines. Norman Bel Geddes, *Horizons* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1935), 111-113. Davis Roberts, *Norman Bel Geddes*, 34-36.

Geddes's plane was never constructed. Nevertheless, Airliner Number 4 came to life on the screen.

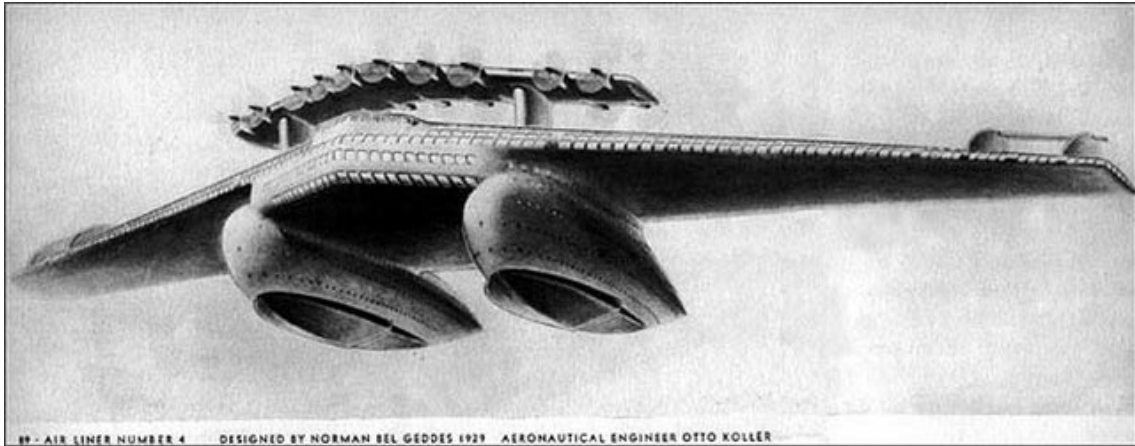


Illustration 6: Norman Bel Geddes's Airliner Number 4.

Bel Geddes's influence on the production extended beyond just the design of airplanes. The Basra airfield has a close resemblance to the hangar buildings and field designs in Bel Geddes's book, particularly the curved roofs and glass ceilings. Even though this is the first example of his influence on the picture, his architectural designs are clearly on display in *Everytown 2036*. Beyond Bel Geddes, the hangar designs were also influenced by Le Corbusier's *Towards an Architecture* (1927). As noted earlier, Le Corbusier was approached to work on the film but rejected Wells's designs, claiming he lacked the futuristic vision desired.⁸² Nevertheless, the look of futuristic aircraft and buildings in the film has a distinct internationalist and art deco feel to them, establishing

⁸² Williams, *H. G. Wells Modernity and the Movies*, 110. See also Le Corbusier, *Towards an Architecture* (London: Francis Lincoln, 1928). Along with Le Corbusier and Bel Geddes, the influences of Erich Mendelson and Serge Chermayeff are also clearly on display in the design of the airplanes, the hangars, and eventually *Everytown* in 2036. Clearly, the film was heavily influenced by the International and Art Deco architectural styles.

them as a quintessential 1930s interpretation of the future.⁸³ In fact, a 1979 “Thirties” exhibit at the Hayward Gallery, Southbank, London, emphasized the film’s aeronautical, industrial, and architectural designs in its exploration of the 1930s.⁸⁴

When they arrive in Everytown, the fast and large bombers of Wings over the World cut through the primitive airplanes of Everytown.⁸⁵ As triumphant music plays, the airmen parachute down and walk amongst the ruins and the residents of Everytown who have been subdued by gas. When Cabal finds the Chief he proclaims to his airmen “he is dead and his world with him.”⁸⁶ The Chief, an allegory for so much that was wrong with Western civilization during the 1930s, died because he would not embrace progress. With the death of the Chief, Cabal and the airmen are prepared, just as Britain was during the interwar years in the Middle East, to install “the rule of the air and a new life for mankind.”⁸⁷

In the third act, Everytown in 2036 is monument to the research, invention, world planning, and scientific control of the airmen. Jeffrey Richards refers to planning as the “great panacea” of the 1930s. Indeed, political leaders on both the left and right were buying into the idea that the state had an important role in planning for the future.⁸⁸ Menzies and Vincent Korda were helped in designing the future Everytown by Hungarian

⁸³ Joseph Corn, ed., *Imagining Tomorrow: History Technology and the American Future* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986) explores this theme at great length in the American context.

⁸⁴ Frayling, *Things to Come*, 11-12. Frayling also points out that *Things to Come* often acts as the starting point, the planes in particular, for film design classes.

⁸⁵ *Things to Come*, 57 Minutes. In Wells’ original treatment of the film, the Basra Bombers were not meant to appear on screen. They were added in Wells’ later scripts for the film. Also, Wells wrote dialogue for the people of Everytown to comment on the air battle, especially on the size and power of the Basra Bomber. However, this did not appear in the final version of the film.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 60 minutes.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 57-61 minutes.

⁸⁸ Richards, “Things to Come and Science Fiction in the 1930s,” 20, and Richards, *Age of the Dream Palace*, 281.

futurist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy.⁸⁹ *Things to Come* actually presaged the reconstruction efforts that went on throughout Europe and Japan in the wake of the Second World War. To civic officials in cities such as London, Coventry, Cologne, Dresden, Hiroshima, and Tokyo rebuilding was an opportunity and, in the words of architecture professor Anthony Vidler, a means of “demonstrating resilience, resistance and hope.”⁹⁰

Though aviation is less prominent in the third act, *Everytown* still resembles a “gigantic air-raid shelter.”⁹¹ Here we can see another connection between the film and Le Corbusier. He used the threat of air attack to advance some of his architectural designs, claiming that large corridors and courtyards would reduce the effectiveness of gas attacks. His ideas about air defence and mitigating air attacks actually spread into French military circles. As Richards notes, Lieutenant-Colonel Vauthier, Inspector General of Aerial, Defence presented a paper to the 1937 International Congresses of Modern Architecture that was influenced by Le Corbusier’s ideas. *Everytown 2036* strongly resembles large open spaces Le Corbusier envisaged. Frayling points out that it is unclear exactly who came up with the detailed designs for the underground air-raid city. He notes discrepancies in the historical record on the subject, with some attributing the designs to Wells, while others credit Menzies and Vincent Korda or Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, because of his connection to the Bauhaus and Wellhouse movements (the connections between *Everytown 2036* and the Bauhaus are noticeable). As noted earlier,

⁸⁹ Richards, “Things to Come and Science Fiction in the 1930s,” J. P. Telotte, *Science Fiction Film* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 94 cited in Bell-Metereau, “The Capital Shape of Science Fiction Heroes to Come,” 117. Moholy-Nagy was central to modernist art and architecture movements during the 1930s. He was a leading member of the International Congress of Modern Architecture, and presented his work at leading art shows and exhibits throughout the United Kingdom. Juliet Gardiner, *The Thirties: An Intimate History* (London: Harper Press, 2010), 319 & 331.

⁹⁰ Anthony Vidler, “Air War and Architecture,” in *Ruins of Modernity*, Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle, eds. (London: Duke University Press, 2010), 31.

⁹¹ Frayling, *Things to Come*, 51.

Le Corbusier was approached regarding the designs for the film, but his involvement in the project did not last long. Vincent Korda moved on with production design on his own, through clearly applying Le Corbusier's ideas.⁹²



Illustration 7: The underground Everytown of 2036.

Aerial warfare would continue to influence home design and construction after the Second World War. Urban decentralization became a core component of urban planning in both the United States and Europe.⁹³ In regards to private dwellings, the United States Strategic Bombing Survey recommended the construction of fallout shelters. In Great Britain, as Beatrix Colomina notes, the 1955-56 space-aged *House Design of the Future* by Peter and Alison Smithson looks like it belongs in Everytown. Indeed, Smithson's design was inspired by her experiences of seeking shelters from bomb raids during the Second World War. Vidler argues in his "Air War and

⁹² Simon Richards, *Le Corbusier and the Concept of Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 219.

⁹³ Peter Galison, "War Against the Center," *Grey Room 4* (Summer 2001) cited in Vidler.

Architecture” that during the height of the nuclear threat in the Cold War – the 1950s and 1960s – Western civilization was inundated with ideas of a shelter society. Indeed, the film represents one of the earliest cinematic examples of a “repressed master discourse of the twentieth century: not the trauma of past loss, but the anticipatory fear of future loss.”⁹⁴

The political leanings of Wells’s technocratic dictatorship are ambiguous, with some scholars and critics claiming Wells was a Marxist, while others accused him of having fascist loyalties.⁹⁵ Whatever the case, Wells remained “profoundly totalitarian” until his death, naively believing that science, engineering, and rationality could bring an entirely positive government.⁹⁶ Wells felt that totalitarianism could function in the presence of a highly educated, progressive elite.⁹⁷ As Keith Williams notes, aviation was like eugenics, state-planning, the body politik, and the degradation of Western civilization; all had their place in worldviews hoping to build a new future, whether they were fascist, communist or liberal.⁹⁸

Leon Stover, writing in 1987, struggles with just what extremist ideology *Wings over the World* actually represents. Stover devotes a considerable portion of his book on *Things to Come* to drawing out the connections between Wells and (through Lenin) Saint-Simon. Despite his emphasis on the socialist elements of Wells’s dictatorship, he

⁹⁴ Vidler, “Air War and Architecture,” 32.

⁹⁵ Phillip Coupland, “H. G. Wells’s ‘Liberal Fascism,’” *Journal of Contemporary History* 35 no. 4: 541-558. Coupland directly addresses the ambiguity of Wells’s political beliefs. He draws the conclusion that Wells was indeed a liberal fascist, or someone who was seeking “liberal ends by means, which were anything but.” The problem with fitting *Things to Come* into this interpretation of Wells’s thought is that the “ends” in the film resemble a fascist state, not a liberal one.

⁹⁶ Richards, “Things to Come and Science Fiction in the 1930s,” 22.

⁹⁷ Patrick Parrinder and Christopher Rolfe, eds., *H. G. Wells Under Revision: Proceedings of the International H. G. Wells Symposium, London July 1986*, (London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1990), 48-49.

⁹⁸ Williams, *H. G. Wells Modernity and the Movies*, 106-119.

refers to Cabal and Wings over the World as the “octopodan state,” a term used by the British press during the 1930s to refer derogatorily to Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.⁹⁹ The state planning, rigid organization, scientific dominance, human solidarity, central ruling committee, state devotion, dominance over nature, or lack of religion could just as easily be interpreted as the creation of a communist world state. Or as Stover puts it: “the air dictatorship in *Things to Come* brings about a scientifically organized, classless society by the same means – collective submission by organized force.”¹⁰⁰

A compelling case for the film’s fascist tendencies can also be made. Wells was often labelled a fascist sympathiser. He respected the discipline, demand of service, and planning of fascism. However, he resolutely condemned its violent nationalism, and devotion to religion and monarchy.¹⁰¹ It might be that the Air Dictatorship and 2036 Everytown represented the culmination of the fascist project stripped of its most heinous transgressions. Considering that Oswald Mosley was the leader of the British Union of Fascists when the film was released, the selection of the name Oswald for John Cabal’s great-grandson and head of the new world order is at best a coincidence, or at worst, highly controversial. This point would not have been lost of viewers in the period, given their sensitivity to fascism. Keith Williams argues that Wells selected the name deliberately.¹⁰² In the case of *Things to Come*, he was often accused of being a fascist and comparisons can be drawn between aviators Cabal and Mosley: both were hoping to transform society using modern scientific methods; both firmly believed in the transformative characteristics of the airplane; both saw technology as benevolent force;

⁹⁹ Stover, *The Prophetic Soul*, 55.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁰¹ Richards, “Things to Come and Science Fiction in the 1930s,” 18 and Parrinder and Rolfe, eds., *H. G. Wells Under Revision*.

¹⁰² Williams, *H. G. Wells, Modernity and the Movies*, 111.

and both had an “impatience” with democracy.¹⁰³ More superficially, the airplane was central to the thought, and influenced the lives, of both Mosley and Cabal. Cabal is a pilot in the film and uses flight to impose the will of *Wings over the World*. In Britain in the 1930s, Mosley was widely supported in the British aviation community and aviation became more closely associated with the right than with any other ideology.¹⁰⁴

The discussion of the space gun’s pilots also strongly hints at the air dictatorship’s predilections for fascism. The young people of Everytown enthusiastically volunteer for the flight, but all those of “imperfect health” have been rejected – recalling the eugenic tendencies of the extreme right. Cabal reminds one of the successful volunteers of the danger involved in the launch, but declares that “the best of life lies nearest to the edge of death” and the old order did not effectively harness human energy; though the airmen’s revolution did not eliminate death and destruction, it pushed them to serve a higher purpose: “there’s nothing wrong in suffering if you suffer for a purpose.”¹⁰⁵ Again, Wells, Menzies, and Korda skirt the ideals of the extreme right – strength, duty, national service (even in death) – a little more closely than many British viewers might have been comfortable with. It was close enough, however, for the British Union of Fascists, who felt the connections between *Wings over the World* and their movement were too clear to not to have no been deliberate.¹⁰⁶ Whatever extremist political ideology Wells can be most closely associated with, the airplane remained central to his worldview. The

¹⁰³ Coupland, “Wells’s Liberal Fascism,” 556.

¹⁰⁴ Cook, “A Fascist Memory,” Edgerton, *England and the Aeroplane*, 48, Oswald Mosley, *The Greater Britain* (London: The British Union of Fascists, 1932), Zander, “(Right) Wings Over Everest.” According to Edgerton, aviators formed a “disproportionate element in the British Union of Fascist.”

¹⁰⁵ *Things to Come*, 91 minutes.

¹⁰⁶ *Action*, February 28, 1936, 6.

airplane proved to be a source of inspiration, hope and awe for a great many of those who believed that the capitalist, Christian, democratic world had run its course.

Whatever the totalitarian leanings of Everytown's dictatorship, the people revolt unsuccessfully against it and storm the space gun, having been incited by Theotocopulos (Cedric Hardwicke), an artist who "hates the cold planned, technological perfection."¹⁰⁷ In Wells's earlier version of *Wither Mankind?* aviators were supposed to be shown participating in the mob; however, they do not appear in the film.¹⁰⁸ As the space gun is readied, Theotocopulos and Cabal engage in a simplified Apollonian-Dionysian discussion of the value of the arts and science.¹⁰⁹ After the launch, Cabal claims what they have achieved is "magnificent" and that their modernist project must continue. Humanity must conquer all the "depths of space and the mysteries of time."¹¹⁰

The Reception of *Things to Come* in the Press

The film received considerable attention from the British press and film critics. Before its release, in autumn 1935, Wells published a printed version of the film's script, which failed to impress the reviewer in the *Times*.¹¹¹ *Things to Come* was immediately compared to Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, which was released on February 5, 1936, only two weeks earlier.¹¹² Generally, reviewers had positive things to say about the film, especially its potential impact on filmmaking. For example, the *Hollywood Spectator*

¹⁰⁷ Richards, *Age of the Dream Palace*, 283.

¹⁰⁸ *Wither Mankind?* BFI script.

¹⁰⁹ Bell-Metereau, "The Capital Shape of Science Fiction Heroes to Come," 118. Bell-Metereau refers to the masses as "rampaging ignorant hordes" who are easily manipulated by Theotocopulos.

¹¹⁰ *Things to Come*, 102 minutes. Kim Newman in *Apocalypse Movies* likens this to the speech delivered by Klaatu at the end of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, directed by Robert Wise (Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox, 1951), that humanity must continue to peacefully achieve or be destroyed.

¹¹¹ The *Times*, October 29, 1935. The printed version was published through Cresset Press.

¹¹² The *Times*, February 21, 1936.

said that “every once and a while there comes along a motion picture one really must see,” even though they were less enthusiastic about the details of his visions for the future.¹¹³ *Picturegoer Weekly* also felt that all moviegoers ought to see the film, noting the public attention already received by the film and the hundreds of opinions already expressed.¹¹⁴ The *Daily Herald* showered praise on the film, specifically its production values and prophetic visions. *Sight and Sound* called the film “above all spectacular.”¹¹⁵

Reviews were especially impressed by the film’s production, some calling it “the greatest thing that has ever happened in the history of the kinema [sic].”¹¹⁶ The *Daily Telegraph*, said the film made *Metropolis* look like a “quota quickie.”¹¹⁷ *Kinematograph Weekly* heaped praise on the production of the film and Wells’ literary skill, so aptly put on the screen by Korda and his team. Yet, *Kinematograph Weekly* was quick to point out that the wonderful £250,000 stagecraft came at the expense of poor acting and a weak story, but it was “worth every penny.”¹¹⁸ All the more wonderful, it was an entirely British production. *Picture Show*’s reviewer (who also compared Wells’ *Things to Come* and Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times*) felt that world created in the aftermath of the horrors of war was as if scientists had been given a blank slate. *Sight and Sound* shared its competing publications’ views of the production of the film, calling the mise en scène and sheer scale of the sets for 2036 as impressive as anything seen on the screen.

¹¹³ *Hollywood Spectator*, April 25, 1936.

¹¹⁴ *Picturegoer Weekly*, March 7, 1936.

¹¹⁵ Elizabeth Bowen, “A Critical Appreciation,” in *Sight and Sound* 5 no. 26 and the *Daily Herald* in Charles Drazin, *Korda: Britain’s Only Movie Mogul* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 2002), 140.

¹¹⁶ *Kinematograph Weekly*, February 27, 1936.

¹¹⁷ *Daily Telegraph*, cited in cable from Murray Silverstone to Samuel Goldwyn, February 21, 1936, cited in Drazin, *Korda*, 141.

¹¹⁸ *Kinematograph Weekly*, February 27, 1936. At a later point of their review, *Kinematograph Weekly* reiterated their belief in the technical brilliance of the film.

The film's production values were not lost on American film critics. The *Hollywood Spectator* called the film such an "extraordinary technical accomplishment," declaring that it was "screen history."¹¹⁹ In fact, the *Hollywood Spectator's* reviewer appears to have been dumbfounded as to how some of the film's visual effects were achieved and how its sets were constructed. He noted how modern the film looked:

He gives us a world of angles and parallels, a mechanically contrived civilization of straight lines and physical discomfort, houses without windows, chairs without cushions and people without a sense to seek a greater ease.¹²⁰

The *Motion Picture Herald* claimed that the film set new technical standards with its originality.¹²¹

Reviewers were also impressed by its depiction of flight. *Kinematograph Weekly* praised the photography of the airplanes in the film, claiming that the "ultra-modern aerial sequences" were "simply terrific."¹²² *Monthly Film Bulletin* went further in its review of the aerial sequences, writing they were "impossible to forget." Its summary of the film also emphasizes the role that aviation plays in the film, whether it was the "sudden air attack," or John Cabal's arrival "in an aeroplane of a type never seen before."¹²³ More importantly, much of *Monthly Film Bulletin's* account of the film centres on aviation, from the attack on Everytown to the contrasts drawn between the Chief and the World Airmen.¹²⁴ It notes that the World Airmen were able to solve the economic, social, and political problems of the day. American reviews of the film were similarly impressed by the depiction of aviation in *Things to Come*, pointing to the "sky-

¹¹⁹ *Hollywood Spectator*, April 25, 1936. The review recommends that all people in Hollywood go see the film.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Motion Picture Herald*, March 7, 1936.

¹²² *Kinematograph Weekly*, February 27, 1936.

¹²³ *Monthly Film Bulletin* 3 no. 26 (February 1936), 25.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

filling air fleet obliterating Everytown,” and the world being saved from barbarism and the scientific rebirth brought on by the airmen.¹²⁵

Flight, Britain’s leading aeronautical publication in the 1930s, reviewed the film strictly from an aeronautical perspective. It heaped praise on the efforts of the producers: “from the aeronautical viewpoint, apart from any others, congratulations are due to those responsible.” *Flight* also drew a comparison between the Chief and Wings over the World, labelling the Chief as a “swaggering militarist” who has a small number of airplanes and his opponents “progressive-minded young airmen” and their large “Pterodactyls.” They also note Wells’s early interest in air power and his selection of aviators as the future saviours of humankind:

Now that it has become one of the features of the present and the future – though its future is still a mystery – it is natural that Mr. Wells should chose the air and airmen as the instruments of world reform, as he desires to see the world reformed.

Flight was, perhaps predictably, impressed with what it saw as a fitting depiction of flight in *Things to Come*.¹²⁶ Other publications, however, were not so kind to Wells’ treatment of aviation and technology. In its review of *Things to Come*, the *Times* pointed out the clear contradiction in Wells’s use of aviators as both the destroyers and saviours of civilization. The consensus among British film critics was that the film was sure to be a box-office smash. For example, *Kinematograph Weekly* said, “*Things to Come* is more than a great show, it is news, one of the all too few box office certainties of the year.”¹²⁷

Aerial warfare also featured prominently in reviews of the film. The consensus opinion amongst British reviews was that the aerial attack was suspenseful, frightening,

¹²⁵ *Motion Picture Herald*, March 7, 1936.

¹²⁶ *Flight*, February 27, 1936, 219.

¹²⁷ *Kinematograph Weekly*, February 27, 1936.

and extremely well produced.¹²⁸ Reviewers also tended to regard the aerial attack as realistic. *Picturegoer Weekly* reminded its readers that AA guns were used without effect in the defence of Everytown, hinting there might be no defence against attack from the air. The review goes on to highlight that the consequences of such a war are the destruction of civilization.¹²⁹ *Sight and Sound* paid considerable attention to what they saw as the impressive bombing sequence, and warned its readers that they would be horrified by what they see on screen during the opening act. Worse still, describing it the fictional raid as realistic, it made it seem even more terrifying. Graham Greene, reviewing the film with the *Spectator*, called the aerial attack sequences “convincing” and “vivid.”¹³⁰ This pattern of associating realism with violence was also a critical element of how British film reviewers interpreted the home defence films *The Gap* and *The Warning*.

When the film was rereleased in 1943, to capitalize on the widespread bombing of European cities during the Second World War, *Today's Cinema* commented that Wells's vision for the future had come true. Indeed, most of the reviews of the film's rerelease focused on the bombing sequences in its first act and on the Chief's fiefdom, and ignored the futuristic Everytown. However, this paper (which was published in London), significantly noted that the film did not accurately reflect the “we can take it attitude of the Londoner today.”¹³¹ However, the scale of the attacks on Britain pales in comparison to the more analogous attacks of the Second World War: British and American raids on

¹²⁸ *Monthly Film Bulletin* 3 no. 26 (February 1936), 25.

¹²⁹ *Picturegoer Weekly*, March 7, 1936. The BUF argued in *Action* that if Britain did not focus more on their aerial defences, a fate like the one suffered by the people of Everytown would surely be experienced by London. *Action*, October 31, 1936, 1.

¹³⁰ Graham Greene, *Spectator*, February 28, 1936.

¹³¹ *Today's Cinema*, September 10, 1943.

Germany between 1942 and 1945. They also note with less whimsy the stern warnings that Wells, Korda, and Menzies offer.¹³²

According to Richard Hauser Costa, the messaging in the film would have been especially strong amongst British youth: “[the film] provided millions of young filmgoers who have never read him with a celluloid version of popular image of Wells as architect of the mechanized, scientifically planned order that would follow the Armageddon depicted in the novel.”¹³³ Alluding to an underlying relationship between popular culture and government policy, Michael Coren has argued that the film actually impacted British rearmament plans.¹³⁴ Undoubtedly, *Things to Come* could not possibly be the sole cause of people’s concerns with the fate of their country. However, this did not stop Wells’ son, Anthony West, from trumpeting the role his father’s film played in garnering support for appeasement and even influencing the result of the Munich Conference in September 1938.¹³⁵ Michael Korda has also claimed the film impacted British rearmament policies during the late 1930s, arguing the film’s depiction of the attack on Everytown became “gospel” in the debates surrounding rearmament. In Germany, when Hitler viewed the film he asked Göring to show it to the Luftwaffe.¹³⁶

Despite the positive reviews the film received, it was not a success at the box office, being estimated to have made only £130,000, a number that would have made almost any other picture hugely profitable.¹³⁷ However, given its at least £250,000 cost, the film lost a substantial sum of money. According to John Sedgwick’s POPSTAT

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Hauser Costa, *H. G. Wells*, 125.

¹³⁴ Coren, *The Invisible Man*, 195.

¹³⁵ West, *H. G. Wells: Aspects of a Life*, 130.

¹³⁶ Michael Korda, *Charmed Lives: A Family Romance* (New York: Random House, 1979), 121-122.

¹³⁷ Drazin, *Korda*, 142. Drazin determined the film’s gross using box office receipts taken from the Prudential Archive.

figures, it was the second most popular British film of 1936, behind another Korda production, *Ghost Goes West*.¹³⁸ Contemporary reviews of the film more than hinted that its pedantic nature was going to be a problem for cinemagoers. Despite its positive comments about the film's vision of the future and its social commentary, *Monthly Film Bulletin* essentially called the film boring, and was particularly put off by the film's lengthy monologues.¹³⁹ They cited Cabal's disdain for the common man, obviously something that may not have enhanced the film's popularity amongst British working-class cinemagoers.

Many of the reviews of the film hinted at the film's potential problems, but were too caught up in its cinematic achievements to recognize that it might not be well received by the average cinemagoer. *Picturegoer Weekly* pointed to Wells' writing as a critical problem with the film. They cite a complete absence of pathos in the film, both when the people of Everytown are being bombed, and when they live in squalor in the post-apocalyptic 1970s. The reviewer claims that destruction of an entire city should have elicited more pronounced emotional responses, a failure of Wells' writing and Korda's production.¹⁴⁰ This, according to *Picturegoer*, was merely a symptom of a film devoid of any suspense or human emotion.

Wells himself was unhappy with the final dialogue, arguing it was "mucked up at the end by powers beyond my control" and that he had to "turn it over to rhetoric."¹⁴¹

These faults, according to *Monthly Film Bulletin*, detracted from what they saw as the

¹³⁸ Sedgwick, "Cinema-going Preferences in Britain in the 1930s," 32.

¹³⁹ *Monthly Film Bulletin* 3 no. 26 (February 1936), 25. I would agree with their assessment of Cabal's diatribes; they are heavy-handed and difficult to listen to, sounding more like a father lecturing his child rather than something a cinemagoer has paid to watch.

¹⁴⁰ Specifically, they say "one drop of red blood and one ounce of real emotion are worth a ton of model guns."

¹⁴¹ "H. G. Wells, Letter 2333 to James Hodson, June 4, 1938," in *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, ed. David C. Smith (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998), 195.

film's significance: "the importance of *Things to Come* lies in its general statement of the problems and the possible future of mankind and in the fact that by the production of this film for general exhibition the potentialities of the cinema as a medium in the presentation of such problems are recognized and demonstrated."¹⁴² Michael Korda, Vincent Korda's son, remarked that British audiences, who had grown so accustomed to American heroes, would not believe that a group of British men could possibly save the world. Additionally, he felt that the bombing sequences might have put off British viewers; they could not stomach the realistic, "cold inhuman version of the future."¹⁴³

The criticisms of the film's messaging have proven to be consistent. However, film historian Jeffrey Richards has argued that people probably appreciated the critical messages of the film, state planning and the threat of war (especially the bomber), but were turned off the film's weak narrative structure and the use of actors for multiple characters.¹⁴⁴ Leon Stover's assessment of the response to the film points however to the dogmatic writing: "in the event, the film was too didactic for public taste."¹⁴⁵ The messaging of the film was hindered by the completely lack of subtlety. Cabal's heavy-handed diatribes against conflict and materialism and must have annoyed many moviegoers.

Conclusion

Things to Come proved to world that British film studios could produce films on the same level of quality and scale as Hollywood and left a lasting legacy in not only

¹⁴² *Monthly Film Bulletin* 3 no. 26 (February 1936), 25.

¹⁴³ Richards, "Things to Come and Science Fiction in the 1930s," 19.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ Stover, *The Prophetic Soul*, xvii.

British but also American film-making. It was hugely influential in the writing of post-nuclear apocalypse films and novels that became popular during the Cold War.¹⁴⁶ For a considerable time after its release it remained on a number of film critics' top twenty-five lists. In 1986, the film was the centrepiece of a larger symposium on Wells's work, where it was introduced by Leon Stover, who has written the largest single-volume on the film. Interestingly, Arthur C. Clarke, the author of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, asked the first question of Stover.¹⁴⁷ Stover also has declared that the film has since been viewed as "a landmark in cinema history and as a deliberate summa of Wells's vision of the future."¹⁴⁸ Christopher Frayling, the former Rector of the Royal College of Art, insists that the film "is to modernism as *Blade Runner* is to postmodernism, which is saying a lot."¹⁴⁹

Unfortunately, the 1940 bombing of London predicted in *Things to Come* proved to be frighteningly correct. In 1946, shortly before his death, H. G. Wells joked to Ernest Barker that his grave marker should read, "Goddamn it, I told you so."¹⁵⁰ He felt that the world had failed to heed what proved to be his very accurate warnings. However, as will be discussed next, there were people in the British film industry who heard Wells's warnings about the future. They sought, with the help of the British government, to make films to warn the British public about the dangers of aerial attack. But was anyone watching?

¹⁴⁶ Hillegas, *The Future as Nightmare*, 63.

¹⁴⁷ *H. G. Wells Under Revision*, 15-16.

¹⁴⁸ Parrinder in Stover, *The Prophetic Soul*, foreword.

¹⁴⁹ Frayling, *Things to Come*, 12.

¹⁵⁰ "H. G. Wells, Letter 2792 to Elizabeth Healey, May 28, 1946, n. 1," in *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, vol 4., 532.

Preparing for the Unthinkable: Air War on the Screen, and *The Gap*, 1927-1938

“The central theme of this film is fear.”

– John Corfield, British National Pictures, May 22, 1937

This chapter will focus on cinematic depictions of aerial warfare from 1927 to March 1938, just before German *Anschluss* of Austria. Specifically, it will look at the 1937 government production *The Gap*, and newsreels depicting aerial war; it will prove Michael Paris’s lightly supported claim that air raid documentaries in the late 1930s contributed to the hysteria surrounding aerial warfare in Britain.¹ *The Gap*, like *The Warning* two years later, was contracted by the British government and produced by Gaumont British, a private company. Both *The Gap* and newsreels explore the measures the British government, particularly the Home Office, War Office and Air Ministry, was taking to protect its citizens for aerial attack. Both acted as more than mere expositions; each had unsubtle propagandistic intentions: to get people to volunteer for civil defence organizations, particularly Air Raid Precautions (ARP). At the same time, they departed from the view widely held during the 1930s that there was no defence against the bomber in order to get people to enlist. Before this chapter examines *The Gap* and newsreels it will briefly examine the state and development of air defence and ARP in Great Britain.

¹ Paris, *From the Wright Brothers to Top Gun*, 108.

Air Defence and the British Government, 1918-1938

The material destruction caused by the raids explored in chapter two helped shape public responses to aerial warfare and informed the interwar home defence planning of the Air Ministry and Home Office. Officials in both offices used the destruction of the First World War as the basis for their assessment of wartime destruction. They calculated that during the Gotha Raids of 1917-1918 German bombers inflicted an average of fifty civilian casualties per ton of bombs dropped on London.² As early as 1922 and 1923 the Air Staff was closely analyzing these attacks on Great Britain during the First World War and came to some frightening conclusions about the destruction a future war would cause: an air attack against Great Britain would also result in at least fifty civilian casualties per ton of bombs dropped.³ This calculation would act as the foundation for future assessments of air attacks during the interwar period. Most government bodies examining aerial warfare, including the 1924 Home Office ARP sub-committee charged with examining air attacks, would apply it uncritically. That committee was chaired by Sir John Anderson, the Under-Secretary of State at the Home Department, who by the outbreak of the Second World War was responsible, along with Sir Geoffrey Lloyd, for preparing the country for air raids.⁴ Throughout the 1930s and 1940s Anderson acquired a reputation as being one of the most effective government administrators.⁵ The personality and even-handedness of Anderson are important to keep in mind; he was not one to succumb to fads or whimsical ideas about air attack. His firm

² T. H. O'Brien, *Civil Defence* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1955), 16.

³ Richard M. Titmuss, *Problems of Social Policy* (London: His Majesty's Stationary Office, 1950), 3.

⁴ Sir Geoffrey Lloyd (1902-1984) served as the Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for Air, Sir Samuel Hoare, from 1926 to 1929 and the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department from 1935 to 1939.

⁵ Powers, *Strategy Without Slide-rule*, 121.

belief in the need to defend Britain against a potential apocalypse speaks to that notion's pervasiveness in British society. As noted, the ARP subcommittee applied the fifty casualties per ton of explosives rule in its assessment of the damage that would come to Great Britain in a future war.⁶ Under Anderson the committee was charged with a sweeping mandate: determine how Great Britain could be protected from and absorb air attack.⁷ This task was complicated by the fact that throughout the 1920s the power and military role of the airplane remained in constant flux. The committee presented its first set of findings in 1925. It made two critical arguments that reflected the popular and professional sentiment of the time: one, enemy bombers would surely focus their attack on London; two, that an enemy attack would not concentrate on specific targets, rather it would carpet bomb the city in an attempt to demoralize the British population or, even worse, incite revolt.⁸ This mindset reflected the views of the Home Office, Air Ministry, and War Office and went a long way to determining how the government would approach civil defence. More specifically, civil defence would require not just protecting, but also controlling the civilian population, which could be as decisive as defence.

Essentially this early ARP Committee report would set the tone for subsequent committee reports on air defence, up to and including the 1937 ARP Bill. In fact, the belief that the civilian population of London would collectively lose their minds, or even revolt, was so firmly entrenched in official attitudes towards air attack that the Health Ministry was preparing for three to four million "inevitable" cases of neuroses.⁹ At the

⁶ Titmuss, *Problems of Social Policy*, 4.

⁷ Powers, *Strategy Without Slide-Rule*, 122-124.

⁸ O'Brien, *Civil Defence*, 16-26.

⁹ Neville Jones, *The Beginnings of Strategic Air Power: The British Bomber Force, 1923-1939* (London: Routledge, 2003), 19. For another interesting example of British reactions to bombing see Joanna Bourke, *Fear: A Cultural History* (London: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005). In chapter 8, "Civilians Under Attack," Bourke explores the impact that bombing had on the British public psyche during the Second World War.

same time, the Air Ministry, Home Office, and Health Ministry felt the most effective way to soften the psychological impact of the expected knock-out blow would be to “stiffen” the resolve of the British public. It was hoped this could be done in a number of ways. First, the army would be used to help maintain civil order and help evacuate citizens if necessary. Second and more important, would be to educate and involve the public in their own defence, by creating an organization responsible for air raid warnings, first aid, rescue, decontamination, enforcing blackouts, constructing shelters, and fire-fighting.¹⁰ This approach was reinforced by the Warren Fisher Committee which declared the primary responsibilities of ARP to be first and foremost maintain the morale of the civilian population and second to minimize the damage to city and the disruption to public services and infrastructure.¹¹

As Hitler came to power and Great Britain slid deeper into the Great Slump, the government was taking more steps to establish a permanent ARP organization. In April 1935, the ARP Department was created at the Home Office, and the structure started to branch out into local boroughs.¹² These local organizations would ultimately form the foundation of the ARP organization the Home Office went to war with in 1939. ARP was meant to be decentralized to encourage recruitment at the local level and to minimize the disruption to services should Britain be attacked. By the end of 1936, the majority of

She notes that pre Second World War commentators such as H. G. Wells and J. F. C. Fuller were wrong in their assertion that British cities would descend into chaos during bombing raids. She points to many of the same sources and arguments that have been outlined in this chapter. She contends that civilians showed considerably more resilience than during the First World War, and to some extent people actually became accustomed to the bombing. In fact, she finds that people were less anxious while a real war loomed, rather than anticipating a potential one. It was that very acclimatization that caused panic-induced crush at Bethnal Green tube station in March 1943, long after the worst of the Blitz had passed.

¹⁰ O'Brien, *Civil Defence*, 3.

¹¹ O'Brien, *Civil Defence*, 95 and Robert MacKay, *Half the Battle: Civilian Morale in Britain during the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 32.

¹² Local boroughs, especially those outside of the large urban areas, were cool to the idea of establishing local ARP groups. Many felt that they were too expensive during lean economic years. Others felt they were war mongering. O'Brien, *Civil Defence*, 68.

metropolitan boroughs (23 of 30) and rural authorities (94 of 144) had, or were in the process of, preparing air raid defence schemes. Along with the department itself and the slowly growing local branches, the department also opened a gas training school in 1936 and a gas mask factory in Blackburn.¹³ From the very beginning of its existence the ARP Department actively pursued one of its first mandates: to educate and inform the public about the precautions being taken in their defence, and how they could assist. Initially, they used a series of pamphlets and handbooks (such as *Anti-Gas Precautions*, *Household Handbook*, and *The Treatment of Casualties*) that were distributed through local boroughs or employers.¹⁴ Initially, ARP was careful not to advocate directly to the British public, out of concern for creating a sense of panic or fear. As the international situation deteriorated through 1936, ARP became more public in its drive for volunteers, specifically asking for 250,000 to 300,000 volunteers for part-time work as air raid wardens. Despite this, the public still knew very little of the full ARP scheme.

To counter this, in early 1937, ARP moved towards even more public profile and started actively to promote the service. Included in the increased public profile for ARP was *The Gap*. Around the time the film was released in British cinemas, the government predictions – continuing to use the fifty casualties/ton of explosives measure – about the future air wars became even more morbid. Air Ministry estimates in 1937 claimed that no fewer than 600,000 civilians would be casualties of aerial attacks. Additionally, air attacks on London alone would cost the British economy at least £550 million in the first three weeks alone. Not only would more than half a million people become casualties and millions more made homeless, the economy would be ruined and those left alive

¹³ Ibid., 78. This reflects the special place gas had in the minds of defence planners.

¹⁴ Ibid., 66. Until the end of 1936 the largest amount of these pamphlets distributed was approximately 118,000.

would have to endure a country in which amenities and infrastructure were completely smashed. Transportation, food supply, electricity, gas, water, and sanitation facilities would all cease to function. The government, it was thought, would have to be moved out of London. For all intents and purposes, an air attack against the United Kingdom would leave the government and economy crippled. Uppermost in the minds of many Home Office, War Office, and Air Ministry officials was the response of civilians to such hardship. They fully expected those in the Army, Air Force, and Royal Navy to endure. However, civilians were another matter. The Home Office and Air Ministry clung to Trenchard's (completely unfounded) claim that the airplane would be able to crush civilian morale.¹⁵ Basically, the British held to the RAF doctrine that air defences would not win a future war, but a lack of adequate defences certainly could lose one.¹⁶

Government, Cinema, and Aerial Warfare: The Conception and Production of *The Gap*

The British public shared these fears of aerial bombardment, as outlined in chapter two. With this in mind (along with film's incredible popularity amongst the British population, especially the working class), those at the Home Office, ARP, and the Territorial Army firmly believed that film could help the government seize on what the government cinematograph advisor called "public appetite for air defence news" and use the cinema to promote air defence.¹⁷ More specifically, film could be a great help in

¹⁵ Jones, *The Beginnings of Strategic Air Power*, 17. There was actually little or no study during the interwar period of the effects of aerial attack on civilians. The Committee of Imperial Defence, the Air Ministry and the Home Office were basing most of their findings on the experience of the First World War, without accurately factoring in improved home defence networks and the improved capability of RAF fighter aircraft.

¹⁶ E. J. Kingston-McCloughry, *Defence Policy and Strategy* (Newark: Praeger, 1960), 213.

¹⁷ TNA WO 32/2698, Territorial Army: Anti-Aircraft and Coast Defence (Code 6(C)): A.A. Defence Film "The Gap," Minute Sheet, Government Cinematograph Advisor, Anthony Shields, His Majesty's Stationary Office, July 11, 1935.

improving Britain's defences, by not only making people more aware of the potential dangers the bomber posed, but also keeping the bomber in the minds of the British public. At the same time, this would counter the sensationalized portrayal of aerial destruction in Hollywood films. It was also thought this film would encourage recruitment, something that was seen as necessary given Britain's re-armament scheme.¹⁸ Officials at Gaumont British, the company that would produce *The Gap*, felt that the successful 1935 film *RAF* (discussed in chapter four) had set a precedent for aerial propaganda films working in British cinemas.¹⁹

To do this, the Home and War Offices, along with the Territorial Army and ARP, decided to move away from smaller documentary films and local distribution to a full-length feature and a national distribution campaign. They felt that a professionally-made, nationally-distributed picture would have greater appeal to the British public, cost the government the least amount of money, and most effectively deal with all elements of air defence.²⁰ Additionally, from the beginning of production, those in government felt the quality of the film – in a market flooded with big budget American pictures – would be vital to ensure it was well attended and its message well-received. With this in mind, the Home Office decided to have a private film company produce the film, rather than

¹⁸ TNA WO 32/2698, Territorial Army: Anti-Aircraft and Coast Defence (Code 6(C)): A.A. Defence Film "The Gap," Letter from Major General P. Cummings, Chairman, Joint Publicity Committee, Territorial Army and Air Force Associations of the City and Council of London to the Duke of York's Headquarters, London, March 7, 1935.

¹⁹ TNA WO 32/2698, Territorial Army: Anti-Aircraft and Coast Defence (Code 6(C)): A.A. Defence Film "The Gap," Minute Sheet, Government Cinematograph Advisor, Anthony Shields, His Majesty's Stationary Office, July 11, 1935.

²⁰ TNA WO 32/2698, Territorial Army: Anti-Aircraft and Coast Defence (Code 6(C)): A.A. Defence Film "The Gap," Proposals for Instructional Films on Air Raid Precautions, February 26, 1936, Letter from the Permanent Under Secretary of State, War Office to Under Secretary of State, Home Office (copied to Government Cinematographic Advisor), August 8, 1935.

government film offices like the GPO Film Unit.²¹ Given the proposed film's subject matter – airplanes and aerial attack – the Home Office (specifically ARP) argued that the film had the potential to be a successful commercial venture for one of Britain's film companies, for film distribution companies and cinemas alike. In fact, some members of the Joint Publicity Committee of the Territorial Army felt that the film's subject matter alone would be adequate to stimulate viewer interest; they would not need to embark on a large publicity campaign nor would cinemas charge the government for showing the picture.²² The folly of this notion will be explained shortly. In the end, Gaumont British Instructional films was contracted to produce the film (partly at their expense).

Despite the government's initial belief that film would have considerable appeal to the British public and be a boon for cinema houses, Gaumont British did not share the government's opinion. They were concerned that they would have to struggle to reconcile their commercial interests with the film that the government envisioned – one that would outline Great Britain's air defences, while emphasising the role to be played by anti-aircraft guns, searchlights, listening devices, and RAF squadrons. In the eyes of Gaumont British, such a film was not guaranteed to draw British moviegoers. Gaumont British, while recognizing the public interest and quality of *RAF*, clearly warned the government that it had not been a commercial success (they did not provide a definition of "commercial success"). They made it clear to the government that they would require creative control of the film, and it would need to be more than a mere presentation of the

²¹ TNA WO 32/2698, Territorial Army: Anti-Aircraft and Coast Defence (Code 6(C)): A.A. Defence Film "The Gap," Copy of a letter from Secretary, Territorial Army and Air Force Association of the County of London regarding the issues of making films, May 1935.

²² TNA WO 32/2698, Territorial Army: Anti-Aircraft and Coast Defence (Code 6(C)): A.A. Defence Film "The Gap," Letter from John K. Dunlop, Joint Publicity Committee of the T.A. Associations of the City and Council of London, Duke of York's Headquarters, London to Lt. General Sir Walter Kirke, War Office, May 22, 1936.

defences; that presentation would have to be built around something resembling a story, otherwise there would be no viewer interest in the film.²³ Additionally, Gaumont British stressed the film would need to be high quality and effectively promoted to be successful. Another aspect of their attempts to reduce their costs for the film was ensuring the full (and free) cooperation of the Air Ministry, War Office and Home Office. Obviously, they were more than happy to provide assistance to a film that was promoting their services. Yet, the Air Ministry, Home Office, and War Office were quick to ensure that the film did not interfere with the regular training of air defence units, nor reveal any secrets of Britain's air defence networks.²⁴ Ultimately the film was produced using footage shot around various RAF bases, AA Battalions in and around London and Aldershot, and ARP units in London.

Much of this concern regarding potential viewer interest in the film and its profitability was derived from Gaumont British and the government's keen awareness of the influence that American films were having on public opinion in the country; they actually took this into account when drafting the film. Additionally, their awareness of the sensationalism inherent in American films hints at a deliberate attempt on the part of the British government to exaggerate the potential for destruction in aerial attacks:

The public has been accustomed of late to certain American air films, both unofficial and semi-official, which deal with the subject of air attack on a somewhat flamboyant scale. Large numbers of planes are shown in the air in

²³ TNA WO 32/2698, Territorial Army: Anti-Aircraft and Coast Defence (Code 6(C)): A.A. Defence Film "The Gap," Letter from Widdows to the Under-Secretary of State, August, 8, 1935.

²⁴ TNA WO 32/2698, Territorial Army: Anti-Aircraft and Coast Defence (Code 6(C)): A.A. Defence Film "The Gap," Letter from the Air Ministry to Under-Secretary of State, War Office, August 14, 1936, Letter from H. Bruce Wolfe, Gaumont-British Instructional Pictures to J. G. Hughes Roberts, His Majesty's Stationary Office, June 9, 1936, Letter from John K. Dunlop, Joint Publicity Committee of the T.A. Associations of the City and Council of London, Duke of York's Headquarters to Bayne, War Office, October 27, 1936. By the time the film was finished Gaumont-British actually was lamenting that they had not solicited more help from the RAF, as they ended up playing a larger role in the film than Gaumont British had anticipated.

formation, and highly dramatic atmosphere is created. The public is also encouraged by certain newspapers to think in terms of very large numbers. It is appreciated that a good deal of this is completely inaccurate, and does not correspond with the tactics to conduct a raid after dark on this country. At the same time, if as appears to be the case in this film, it is believed that a false impression may be created and the film may create a certain amount of derision, or at any rate lack of interest. There must in almost every case be a compromise between accuracy and dramatic effect, and in this case it is suggested that only a very slight alteration will be necessary in order to create an impression of a much more powerful enemy attack.²⁵

Clearly, those who were involved in the production of *The Gap* had little doubt in their own minds that the cinema could be used to influence the opinion of the British public. However, what was the message they hoped to relay to the British populace when the film was being produced? It is necessary to quickly explore this point before discussing what actually appeared on screen and how it resonated with the British public, and more quantifiably with the British press. A draft scenario of the film written in May 1936 effectively outlines the film's primary goals: one, to show the British public that the danger of an air attack against a major British city is a new and very real problem; two, that airplanes have the ability to "sail at will over our land and shower their bombs with impunity" unless RAF fighters and anti-aircraft brigades work together to destroy them; three, it will only be possible to prevent attacks on British cities with the full cooperation and assistance of everyone.²⁶ The attempt to strike fear into the hearts of British cinemagoers was evident at the outset of production. In November 1935, the Air

²⁵ TNA WO 32/2698, Territorial Army: Anti-Aircraft and Coast Defence (Code 6(C)): A.A. Defence Film "The Gap," Letter from John K. Dunlop, Joint Publicity Committee of the T. A. Associations of the City and Council of London, Duke of York's Headquarters, Chelsea, London, S.W. 3 to C. L. Bayne, Esq., The War Office, Whitehall, S. W. 1, September 2, 1936.

²⁶ TNA WO 32/2698, Territorial Army: Anti-Aircraft and Coast Defence (Code 6(C)): A.A. Defence Film "The Gap," Draft Scenario of *The Gap*, May 1936.

Ministry wrote a letter to the War Office stressing that the dangers of gas attacks and bombing should be stressed in the film.²⁷

By publishing articles on the production of the film, the British press actually played an important role in promoting *The Gap* almost a year before its release. On August 18, 1936, the *Evening Standard* published a lengthy article on the upcoming “thrilling, but deadly serious picture.”²⁸ According to the preview, the upcoming film would be a dour assessment of the deficiencies in British air defences. There would be “no romance, [and] no film stars:” all these would detract from the important message of the film. The *Daily Telegraph* used even stronger language to describe the film, insisting that it would demonstrate “in graphic manner, the vital part that the Territorial Army would play in the nation’s defence in a war.”²⁹ According to the previews, the film would pay special attention to the control rooms coordinating the defensive effort. This control would assist the RAF intercept the enemy raiders in their high-speed aircraft, while alerting the undermanned defensive rings surrounding London. The technological sophistication of the British air defences was also emphasized, both implicitly and explicitly. For example, most articles noted that making the film would be a great thrill for the cameramen, who would be given the opportunity to fly at great speeds in RAF fighters. Additionally, most preview articles stressed the technology that would be

²⁷ TNA WO 32/2698, Territorial Army: Anti-Aircraft and Coast Defence (Code 6(C)): A.A. Defence Film “The Gap,” Letter from the Air Ministry to the Permanent Under Secretary of State, the War Office, November 16, 1935 and TNA WO 32/2698, Territorial Army: Anti-Aircraft and Coast Defence (Code 6(C)): A.A. Defence Film “The Gap,” Proposals for Instructional Films on Air Raid Precautions, February 26, 1936. By the same token, the Admiralty and the War Office’s Chemical Research Department felt it was equally important to show that there were protective measures that citizens could take against gas attacks, and that the government was training personnel to deal with gas attacks.

²⁸ *Evening Standard*, August 18, 1936. No fewer than eleven different dailies contained stories about the upcoming air raid film. They include the *Glasgow Herald*, the *Scotsman*, the *Daily Telegraph* (on both August 17, 1936 and August 18, 1936), the *Daily Independent*, the *Evening News*, the *Daily Film Renter*, *Today’s Cinema*, the *Yorkshire Post*, the *Daily Express*, the *Daily Sketch* and the *Daily Mirror*.

²⁹ *Evening Standard*, August 18, 1936.

featured in the film: the AA guns, control rooms, wireless communication, listening posts, searchlights and, of course, fighters and bombers. The consistency between different newspaper and periodical reviews of the film is noteworthy. Each newspaper took press releases from the Home Office directly with limited critical insight or analysis; it appears this was the result of ready acceptance of the film's message on the part of the press. Along with their previews of the film, newspapers reinforced the idea that these services were essential to the survival of Great Britain. All of these previews conveyed a sense of authenticity to their readership by emphasizing the participation of the Home Office, the War Office, the Air Ministry, and the RAF in the production of the film. The film's authenticity was endorsed by other periodicals such as the *Daily Film Renter* that emphasized the experience of Gaumont British in making documentary films. This point is particularly laboured in the *Evening Standard* and other papers' discussion of the future cooperation of the RAF and the Territorial Army.

A Threat to the Nation: *The Gap*

Moving to the film itself, the depiction of aerial attack and air defence will be considered followed by press and popular reaction. Understandably, the airplanes in *The Gap* are depicted as menacing weapons, maintaining the commonly held British belief that the aeroplane had radically altered the country's strategic realities and defence plans. *The Gap* makes this point clear in its first frames. As the film opens, the English Channel appears and a title reads "For nearly 900 years the sea has been our bulwark and the Navy our shield. No invader has set foot upon our soil."³⁰ The film then quickly cuts to a group of airplanes flying in tight formation as they pass over White Cliffs of Dover, the English

³⁰ *The Gap*, 1 minute.

countryside, and then over St. Paul's.³¹ Over London, they draw the attention of older Londoner who says: "we must give the defence fellows time to practice." A young middle-class man replies "Defence? There is no defence against air attack."³² An older woman interjects, proclaiming she knows young men who are doing something by enlisting. Clearly, the film is focused on encouraging enlistment from the outset and hinting that the bomber can be stopped.

The image of the British government in *The Gap* was also carefully formulated. The character of the Cabinet Minister responsible for air defence is carefully cast; he is seen as a conscientious and careful man (not unlike Anderson), who is deeply concerned with the growing unnamed international crisis, sentiments that he shares with the prime minister, whom he meets with off screen. Clearly, the film is conveying the message that the British government was doing everything possible to avoid war, but would be prepared if it should be subjected to one.³³ After meeting with the prime minister, the minister immediately contacts an RAF air marshal in Britain's air defence control room, informing him that the government is doing everything it can to prevent a war, but they had better begin to prepare for an attack. The air marshal replies dutifully "everything is in hand."³⁴

Much of the film is connected through the control room – an impressive expression of British modernity and technological advancement. The cabinet minister is connected directly to the air marshal, who is seated on the top balcony of a two-balcony

³¹ Ibid., 2-4 minutes.

³² This is merely the first appearance of everyday British life in the film. The minutes leading up to the aerial attack are infused with shots of Britons, specifically Londoners going about their daily business.

³³ This is also conveyed through the fictitious news headlines used in the city scenes as the country builds towards war. For example, the sandwich board at one newsstand reads "Midnight Meetings of Cabinet" in addition to "Air Force Ready" and "Gas Mask Supply Adequate."

³⁴ *The Gap*, 12 minutes.

room. The director holds the wide shot of the control room for an extended period, presumably to allow the viewer to gain a full appreciation of the complexities and size of the room. Each level is filled with men wearing headphones using telephones. At the centre of the room is a large map of Britain with various markings on it. There are numerous illuminated message and status boards on the walls of the room. The room is a bustle of activity as each man reports back the readiness of the units he is in communication with. With each completed call, items are moved on the maps and message boards around the room are changed. The message boards become the focus of attention later in the film as the RAF scrambles to intercept the attacking bombers. Each fighter squadron has its own row on the board with different indicators signifying if they are “standing by,” “refuelling,” or “in action.”³⁵ At one point, the film briefly focuses on two men who are working the telephones in the control room. One comments, “I find the energy in the room electric. We’re pretty lucky to be in here – gas proof, bomb proof. Ordinary people out there don’t stand a chance.” His comrade replies, “they just have to take what’s coming and can’t do anything about it. Let’s hope the coastal defences are strong enough” before they hurry back to their duties.³⁶

If the film’s message is readily accepted, those coastal defences are indeed strong enough. A considerable portion of the film’s screen time devoted to the Territorial Army’s anti-aircraft artillery and the supporting ground forces. The ground forces of the Territorial Army are entirely composed of volunteers. Indeed, the film takes the form of

³⁵ Ibid., 17 minutes. The filmmakers actually use the indicator board between shots of the stages of RAF preparation. For example, as the pilots are being briefed (which will be explored shortly) the board reads “standing by,” as their aircraft are being readied for their sortie it reads, “refuelling,” as the fighters (Hawker bi-planes) take-off the board changes to “in action.” It should be noted that the shifts from “standing by” to “refuelling” are staggered, but all the squadrons are deemed to be “in action” simultaneously.

³⁶ Ibid., 18 minutes.

a story told to these volunteers when they first enlist in ARP.³⁷ Before they are shown defending Great Britain, volunteers receive a brief lecture on the multiple rings of guns and searchlights surrounding London and the lines of guns on the coast. However, no detail is given about how those guns operate or exactly where they are located – just the fact that they exist. Furthermore, radar (still a secret) is also omitted from the discussion. While the officer is briefing the volunteers, he repeats the point that the lines of defence only exist because civilian volunteers have willingly offered their time to defend the country from attack. Further, he notes how they are trained to operate their equipment in a professional way and taught how to distinguish different types of aircraft – specifically friend from foe.³⁸ One of the pupils notes a gap in the defence networks to the southwest of London; he inquires if it is a trap for the enemy. His instructor (Patric Curwen) sobers his enthusiasm by indicating it is not a trap, but a gap in the defences caused by insufficient volunteers: “Our only defence is you fellows in the Territorial Army, and until it is at full strength, there’s bound to be a gap somewhere.”³⁹ When the warning of an aerial attack finally goes out to the British public – by means of a BBC radio presenter – men of all walks of life are shown heeding the warning: a butcher, a construction worker, a banker, and an aristocrat playing chess in his manor, all react to trumpets, presumably calling them to arms. The viewer quickly realizes that these are the men who

³⁷ The story takes place in the setting of an introductory lecture, held presumably somewhere on a British military base. The room is adorned with maps and diagrams on the wall. The lecturer informs the volunteers how the 1 ARP Division will operate in the south in the event of an aerial attack.

³⁸ *The Gap*, 6-8 minutes. The film pays close attention to the training of the ARP volunteers. They are depicted working closely with their NCOs learning how to track RAF test planes. In one scene a volunteer catches the sound of the airplane on his listening device, but his comrade sluggishly readies his gun. His NCOs screams at him “if this was a real war you’d ruin it.”

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 6-8 minutes. The instructor also tells his pupils that the gap in the defences can move to different sections around London. Short, *Screening the Propaganda of British Airpower*, 4.

were being briefed at the start of the film. Indeed, men from all walks of life and social standing are shown to be coming together in the defence of Great Britain.

Once called up, the ARP volunteers respond to the impending crisis with the efficiency and speed of professional soldiers.⁴⁰ They quickly mount their guns and searchlights on the back of trucks and head into the countryside. Once they are set up, they inform – a volunteer is shown adeptly using wireless radio – the central control room that they are ready for action and message boards in the room respond accordingly. Additionally, they also serve an important function in keeping the central control room informed of the location, type, speed, and altitude of enemy aircraft as they enter British air space.⁴¹ The defensive attack that the home defence battalions unleash on the invading bombers is also impressive. The observers quickly track the planes with their listening devices, determining their speed, altitude and heading. This draws the attention of a searchlight and is quickly followed by AA guns firing on the bomber (the bomber is clearly a model resembling an actual German bomber). There is considerable emphasis placed on the complexity of both the searchlights and guns – how they are loaded, aimed and operated. Eventually the enemy bomber is shot down, and they report back to the control that enemy bombers have been repelled off the Kent coastline. A similar scene is shown later in the film as enemy raiders approach London. Throughout both scenes depicting the Territorial Army attacking enemy bombers the volunteers are shown doing their work energetically and effectively, every now and again pausing to unleash some

⁴⁰ It should be noted that war is never officially declared in the film, nor is the enemy nation mentioned explicitly. K. R. M. Short also notes this discrepancy in his analysis of the film. Short, *Screening the Propaganda of British Airpower*.

⁴¹ *The Gap*, 12-15 minutes. The civilian observers are shown monitoring the enemy planes and, after consulting with guidebooks, determining that the airplanes overhead do not belong to the RAF.

sort of patriotic or spiteful rhetoric.⁴² Indeed, the average British citizen, whether rich or poor, is shown to be playing a vital role in the defence of the country.

These ground forces are depicted as merely one element of Britain's defences against the aerial attack.⁴³ The other – the Royal Air Force – is also shown to be a capable and highly modern force. RAF officers do not appear until the fifteenth minute – nearly the midway point of the picture. After receiving their orders to scramble from the control room, a group of RAF pilots are briefed by their commanding officer. The pilots are all very young, wearing white scarves and sporting moustaches; they listen intently and are literally sitting on the edge of their seats, as they are given the instructions for the defence of their sector.⁴⁴ The director then cuts to showing them running to their Gloster Gauntlets as air raid sirens are heard off-screen. As the planes race into the sky, their commanding officer watches them paternally and smiles. This depiction of RAF pilots is actually in direct contrast to the aviator suggested in Francis's *The Flyer*, in which RAF pilots were often seen by the British public as drunkards or rebels; the pilots in *The Gap* are dutiful and enthusiastic defenders of Great Britain.⁴⁵

The RAF reappears after the enemy aircraft pass through the initial lines of ground defences. While the AA guns turn some of the marauders away, others either bypass them or break through. Looking skyward, one AA observer proclaims, "it's up to our fighters now!"⁴⁶ The RAF fighters begin attacking the enemy bombers with support from listening devices and searchlights on the ground. The filmmakers emphasize this

⁴² *The Gap*, 23-26 minutes. One volunteer proclaims before loading his gun: "I think the next one has your name on it!"

⁴³ It should be quickly noted that the enemy airplanes are clearly intended to be German; they approach England from the east. In the case of *The Gap*, the depiction of the airplanes actually stirred a response from the German government, as will be explored later in the chapter.

⁴⁴ *The Gap*, 15-17 minutes.

⁴⁵ Francis' exploration of the image of the RAF during the 1930s is discussed in chapter four.

⁴⁶ *The Gap*, 22 minutes.

point in a number of different shots and in the dialogue. For example, an RAF officer reminds an Army officer in the control room that the fighters' success will largely depend on the searchlights.⁴⁷ In the next shot, an enemy bomber (a model airplane) is shown being tracked by searchlights as a fighter gives pursuit. The fighter destroys the enemy bomber as those on the ground enthusiastically cheer the pilot on: "he's got him! There's another down the drain!"⁴⁸ As the RAF engages the bombers, events are reported back to the control room from men on the ground. The controllers plot the course of the enemy airplanes and track the readiness of each of the RAF squadrons. An interesting emphasis, the composition of the RAF during the 1930s was largely middle and upper middle class, while the Territorial Army was middle or working class. Essentially, Britons of all classes were supposed to be coming together in defence of the island.

Despite the efforts of the Territorial Army and the RAF, the attacking bombers still manage to find "the gap" in British air defences.⁴⁹ As two gunners fire at enemy bombers and turn them back out over the North Sea, one turns to the other and asks, "I wonder where the others are? The gap, where is it tonight?" Immediately after, bombs fall on a model of London and a simulated fire begins. The attack from the air is shown through three vantage points: one, the control room as men feverishly respond to the enemy attack; two, through the eyes of an upper-class family; three, people on the streets of London. As the bombing begins, one wealthy-looking gentleman comments on lack of defences or searchlights. As the bombs fall closer they retreat into the kitchen, where an older gentleman tells his (presumably) grown daughter "things are getting harsh [but]

⁴⁷ Ibid., 23 minutes.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 24 minutes. The RAF is shown shooting down three bombers over the course of the film.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 29 minutes. One character actually proclaims in terror "they've found the gap!" Another screams "they've got through" as bombs start to fall.

you've got bad odds of getting hit by a bomb!" He then goes on to tell her to "just imagine you're at the pictures."⁵⁰ In another bedroom an explosion kills a young father as his baby cries. Outside, things are also chaotic. An explosion kills a middle-class family in their home as other buildings crumble and burn. Amidst the burning buildings are people fleeing while screaming or choking on poison gas. Back in the control room, men are shouting over each other that all areas report gas and fires. The film concludes with what K. R. M. Short describes as a defeatist tone.⁵¹ An ARP officer lecturing to a group of volunteers: "that's what would happen if things remain as they are now, so you see how important your job is. Just think, my people might be living in that gap, or yours, or yours!"⁵²

The Gap premiered at the Dorchester Theatre, London on April 7, 1937, less than three weeks before the bombing of Guernica by the German Kondor Legion.⁵³ The showing of the film was presided over by Lord Strathcona, the Under-Secretary of State for War, who dubbed it the "official air defence film."⁵⁴ However, ARP was quick to disassociate themselves from the film, claiming it was made with the full cooperation of the Air Ministry and the Territorial Army, but not ARP.⁵⁵ Strathcona and the other

⁵⁰ Ibid., 31 Minutes. The father also remarks on the scale of attack being endured by London, specifically noting the number of explosions he hears along with the stating there must be at least 100 planes overhead.

⁵¹ Short, *Screening the Propaganda of British Airpower*, 5.

⁵² *The Gap*, 36 Minutes.

⁵³ The film had been shown to members of the government on an unspecified day in February 1937. It was actually well attended. Major F. C. Caillard, ARP department (who would go on to play an important role in the production of *The Warning*), along with the Assistant Under-Secretary of State (War Office), three representatives from the General Staff, one from the directorate of personnel, one representative from the Directorate of Recruiting and the War Office Cinema Advisor all screened the film. TNA WO 32/2698, Territorial Army: Anti-Aircraft and Coast Defence (Code 6(C)): A.A. Defence Film "The Gap," Letter from C. L. Bayne, the War Office, to Lt. Col. John K. Dunlop, Territorial Army Joint Publicity and Recruiting Committee, Duke of York's Headquarters, February 14, 1937.

⁵⁴ *Times*, April 8, 1937, 14.

⁵⁵ TNA WO 32/2698, Territorial Army: Anti-Aircraft and Coast Defence (Code 6(C)): A.A. Defence Film "The Gap," Letter from C. L. Bayne, War Office to Lt. Col. John K. Dunlop, Territorial Army Joint Publicity and Recruiting Committee, Duke of York's Headquarters, February 14, 1937.

attendees, in typical fashion of the period, were given a programme for the film. The programme emphasizes the important role that the government and the military played in the production of the film. To strengthen its claims as official, the programme ends with a statement that the film was “in every respect” an accurate reflection of the views of the authorities responsible for the “security and safety of GB against air attack.” Perhaps it was this depiction of aerial warfare that earned the film an “A” (adults only) by the British Board of Film Censors.

Film trade periodicals accepted the film’s message and gave it positive reviews. All the reviews of the film emphasized its authenticity. *Sight and Sound* mentioned the official nature of the film and the cooperation of the Army and Air Councils. The *Cinema* mentioned the past work of director Donald Carter on other official projects for the War Office, though they are not named. Similarly, *Kinematograph Weekly* commented that scenes involving the anti-aircraft units were enhanced by the involvement of the Army and RAF. *Kinematograph Weekly* and *Monthly Film Bulletin* also praised the efforts of the Territorial Army and RAF, as they are depicted, blaming – as the film intends – the bombing of London on a gap in the defences, not a problem in the system.⁵⁶

Kinematograph Weekly placed considerable emphasis on the message of the film, stating that its subject matter alone demanded a place “in any programme.”⁵⁷ Further, and perhaps even more important, the *Sight and Sound* reviewer argued that the “bomber will always get through” assumption had become so pervasive in British public opinion

⁵⁶ *Monthly Film Bulletin* 4 no. 42 (June 1937) and *Kinematograph Weekly*, April 15, 1937.

⁵⁷ *Kinematograph Weekly*, April 15 1937. In their abbreviated review of the film *Kinematograph Weekly* claimed the film would be “propaganda subject [that is] of interest to all adults.” They continue to emphasize the appeal of the film later in their review

that the film's challenge to it was not compelling, nor was the film successful in allaying fears surrounding the bomber.⁵⁸ To support this, the writers at Britain's major film periodicals claimed that Britons would have already been exposed to the effects of aerial bombing through the destruction of Everytown in *Things to Come*, the bombing demonstrations at the Hendon Air Pageant, or newsreels of Guernica.⁵⁹ *Monthly Film Bulletin* gave clear voice to this sentiment: "the subject is so close to us, and the dreadful fate of Guernica so recent in our memories, that we need little imagination to be moved by the events portrayed in the latter half of the film."⁶⁰ According to *Sight and Sound*, if a viewer was interested in seeing more destruction like this, they would be disappointed by the film because it was actually too restrained, that its lack of "frightfulness" detracted from the message. That lack of horror would, according to *Sight and Sound's* reviewer, not inspire action or encourage enlistment. *Monthly Film Bulletin* did not share *Sight and Sound's* underwhelmed view of the horror of the film. Calling the film "terrifyingly realistic," its reviewer specifically noted the civilians "hapless in their dark homes, and opened to all the perils that the sky lets loose."⁶¹ However, both *Sight and Sound* and the *Cinema* agreed that the main purpose of the film – to encourage enlistment in the Territorial Army or RAF (not a create fear of aerial attack) – was conveyed to the viewer.⁶²

⁵⁸ *Sight and Sound* 6 No. 21 (April 1937), 89. Referring to Baldwin's comments in the House of Commons in November 1932.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* This is the second of two times Guernica and *Things to Come* are mentioned in the review.

⁶⁰ *Monthly Film Bulletin* 4, no. 41

⁶¹ *Kinematograph Weekly*, April 15, 1937. The reviewer also comments on the same civilians enduring destruction and confusion.

⁶² *Sight and Sound*, like the previews in 1936, the film itself and production documentation also emphasizes the official nature of the film and the cooperation of the Army and Air Councils. *Cinema* mentions the past work of director Donald Carter on other official projects for the War Office, though they are not named. *Cinema*, August 19, 1936, 21.

Despite its concerns with the film, *Sight and Sound*'s review accepts the premise: that serious deficiencies exist in Britain's aerial defences networks and that in a modern war everyone, from trawler captains to civilian observers, is required to serve the country. Essentially, *Sight and Sound*'s review of the film sees it as not going far enough, that the dangers of aerial attack and the potential for aerial destruction were much more real and substantial than the film made them appear. British print responses to the film, while concerned that it might have been insufficient to scare civilians into action, still gave the film generally positive reviews, particularly regarding its authenticity.

British newspapers also responded positively to the film. The *Times* review of the film was almost entirely positive; the newspaper contended that the film was "remarkably realistic in most of its aspects, and the more convincing in most of its episodes because of its restraint."⁶³ However, the reviewer was critical of the film's simplification of the gap in British air defences, feeling that this approach was artificial and could have been more nuanced. Nevertheless, the review concluded that assessing the impact of the film on the public mind would be difficult, but at the very least the producers had responsibly depicted future warfare and conveyed their message in a way that would not spread panic.⁶⁴

The message of the film was in no way muddled by the producers. Quite the contrary in fact, reviewers of *The Gap* – despite some concerns – accepted the film's message. The conservative-leaning tabloid *Daily Sketch* evoked the nursery rhyme "rub-a-dub-dub" in praising the film's message and authenticity: "butchers, bakers, and the candlestick makers, instead of being protected in order that they may serve the

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ What is especially curious about this remark is the implication that an inappropriate depiction of aerial warfare would have been likely to spread panic.

community, must themselves protect it.”⁶⁵ From the examination of the control room, to the gassing of civilians and women and children running from burning windows, the film was, according to the reviewer, so grimly realistic that it surpassed “the finest war film.” It is through these realistic depictions of aerial attack (newspapers of the period, especially the tabloids seem to be associating death and destruction with realism) that the film effectively highlights what exactly the experience of being bombed will feel like and the dangers inherent in the gaps in the British aerial defence networks. The film’s reviewer hyperbolically proclaims that the film made him want to run to the nearest recruiting office and volunteer.

The film evoked a response not only in Great Britain, but also in Germany – its implied antagonist. In a report sent back to MI3, a British military attaché in Berlin outlined the German press’s uncomfortable reaction to the film.⁶⁶ Calling it “hate propaganda,” their primary objections were to the clear, though unnamed, implication that Germany was the aggressor and that they had attacked Great Britain without a formal declaration of war. This sentiment was exacerbated by the fact the film was so realistically constructed, creating a sense amongst the British public that this was exactly what Germany might inflict on the country one day.⁶⁷ More specifically, a German newspaper correspondent in London, Graf Pücker, said the film sent shivers down his spine, leading to have deep concerns about what impact the film would have on British

⁶⁵ *Daily Sketch*. The date of the article is unknown. It was part of a collection of newspaper clippings compiled by the Home Office pertaining to the film. TNA HO 45/17602, Civil Defence: ARP Instruction for the Public: Films.

⁶⁶ It is not elaborated on in the report what elements of the German press were reacting to the film negatively. Nor is it specified if these were government owned and operated papers, or ones merely censored by Hitler’s regime.

⁶⁷ TNA WO 32/2698, Territorial Army: Anti-Aircraft and Coast Defence (Code 6(C)): A.A. Defence Film “The Gap,” Communiqué from Military Attaché, Berlin to M. I. 3, Subject: English “Recruiting Film,” April 27, 1937.

cinemagoers that saw it. This suggestion that the film had offended the German government is reinforced by British inter-governmental communications that suggest future air raid instructional films should tone down the presentation of the enemy, for fear of further alienating the Reich.⁶⁸

Even though critics had given the film positive reviews, those involved in the production of the film still felt trepidation about how effective it would be in encouraging Britons to enlist in the Territorial Army or the RAF. Specifically, J. G. Hughes-Roberts, the Government Cinematograph advisor, brought forward two serious questions about the film's impact. One, he argued that films, like *The Gap*, that were overtly service-oriented would be quickly dismissed by the British public and film critics as propaganda.⁶⁹ He felt that cinematic associations with the government needed to be hidden, and the film fictionalized in order for them to be successful. With this in mind, he pointed directly to H. G. Wells' *Things to Come*. He felt that the message contained in that film – that there is no defence against aerial attack – was actually more likely to convince and be enjoyed by cinemagoers.⁷⁰ Basically, not only does a more apocalyptic message sell more tickets – it is more likely to convince the average cinemagoer.

These production concerns were proven correct, and the film was commercially unsuccessful. Exact box office figures are impossible to collect for British cinemas during the interwar period and distribution numbers are equally as difficult to determine.

⁶⁸ TNA HO 45/17602, Civil Defence: ARP Instruction for the Public: Films, Notes on Corfield Proposal, Major F. C. Caillard, Home Office, ARP Department, Horseferry House, May 24, 1937.

⁶⁹ This point is echoed in a letter from R. H. Sturdy, a London Estate Agent, to the War Office, dated October 1937. The letter provides a scathing rebuke of the film's message. He argues that most people he had spoken to regarding the film were not persuaded by it, and it did not encourage them to enlist in ARP or the Territorial Army. Furthermore, he argues that the use of film for propaganda and political purposes is a "dirty trick."

⁷⁰ TNA HO 45/17602, Civil Defence: ARP Instruction for the Public: Films, Notes on Corfield Proposal, Major F. C. Caillard, Home Office, ARP Department, Horseferry House, May 24, 1937.

Therefore, much our understanding of how well *The Gap* was received is derived from the production notes surrounding *The Warning*. ARP's Major F. C. Caillard notes in his minutes about proposals for a new air raid defence film that *The Gap* was introduced to the British public with "a flourish of trumpets" but "little or nothing seems to have been heard of it since its first publicity boost."⁷¹ *The Gap*'s failure is also confirmed by correspondence between the Home Office and Odeon Theatres; the film actually did so poorly that the company pulled it from its theatres. However, Odeon did not feel the idea of using the cinema to promote air defence was inherently flawed. They suggested either creating a film that had the elements of a popular drama, or a series of five or six-minute films that could be played before feature presentations.⁷²

British Newsreels and Aerial Warfare, 1927 - 1939

British newsreel companies conveyed similar messages about aerial warfare as *The Gap*. Like the Gaumont British feature, they tried to encourage volunteerism by showcasing the horrors of modern warfare, but also showing that they could be prevented. This can be seen by looking at coverage both of foreign conflicts and British preparations for war. British newsreel companies extensively covered each of the large conflicts involving major powers. In fact, British Movietone's lengthy review of 1938, which it dubbed "the year of tragedy," prominently featured aerial attacks in both Spain and China.⁷³ The use of the airplane in these conflicts also received screen time in

⁷¹ TNA HO 45/17602, Civil Defence: ARP Instruction for the Public: Films, Letter from Under Secretary of State, Home Office, Air Raid Precautions to the Secretary, the Admiralty, July 11, 1938.

⁷² TNA HO 45/17602, Civil Defence: ARP Instruction for the Public: Films, Letter from Major F. C. Caillard, Home Office, ARP Department to Secretary of State Sir Russell Scott and Wing Commander Hodsoll, July 22, 1937.

⁷³ "Movietone Reviews 1938" (London: British Movietone, December 29, 1938).

newsreels. Though the wars in Africa, Spain, and China were very different, there are common threads running through the depiction of aerial warfare. Newsreel companies sensationalized through their camera work and narration the devastation caused by airplanes. It appears this was done both to cast the extreme right – Italian Fascists, the Japanese, and Franco’s Nationalists – as the villains and to drive home how the airplane was thought to have fundamentally altered war.

Part of British newsreel coverage of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 highlighted the Italian use of airplanes against Haile Selassie and his forces. In most cases, Italian use of airplanes in Abyssian was portrayed as the barbaric use of modern weapons against an idyllic and impoverished people. This portrayal of the use of airplanes against a native people is ironic, considering RAF actions against the people Palestine, Iraq, and Africa.⁷⁴ Italian bombers were shown dropping a “rain of death” or “dealing out destruction and injury” on Ethiopian mud huts and village.⁷⁵ The same went for Selassie’s palace, as British newsreels managed to capture an Italian bombing raid against the emperor’s home. The Italian forces were ruthless and indiscriminate in their raids, even bombing Red Cross units on the ground. At the same time, the airplane was shown as a critical element of Italy’s military dominance of the war; it was sometimes shown as paving the way for Italian ground forces.⁷⁶

The tone of British newsreel coverage of the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) conveyed the same two primary messages: one, an exposition of the villainy of Japan’s

⁷⁴ David Omissi, *Air Power and Colonial Control*.

⁷⁵ “Abyssinia, Italian Forces Capture Amba Alaji” (London: British Paramount Newsreels, March 16, 1936), “Battle of Amba Aradam” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, February 27, 1936), and “Italians Bomb Dessie, Ethiopia” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, December 9, 1935).

⁷⁶ “Ethiopia, Air Raid on Palace of Emperor Selassie” (London: British Paramount Newsreels, December 9, 1935) and “Italian Military Attacks Ethiopia” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, April 30, 1936).

attack against China; two, the horrific nature of aerial warfare. As early as 1934, newsreel companies used Japanese terror bombing of China to show in graphic detail the destructive nature of aerial conflict. Newsreels chronicled the bombings of cities such as Nanking, Shanghai, Hankow, Chapei, and Nantao. They follow a universal form, first showing Japanese airplanes flying overhead, then Chinese civilians fleeing for cover as bombs begin to fall. In most reels, the Chinese are shown resisting the Japanese with AA guns, but they never have their own airplanes, nor are they successful. The Chinese are not able to save their cities or their occupants from attacking Japanese bombers that deliver their “devil’s cargo” in “unending bombardments.”⁷⁷ Newsreel coverage of the attack on Chongqing in 1939 neatly summarizes these trends. According to British Movietone, the raids killed 16,000 civilians and created one million refugees over two days and nights of bombardment. Their coverage mixed images of people fleeing the rubble with images of Chongqing on fire, people running, and buildings exploding.⁷⁸

Some newsreels even alluded to aerial warfare’s potential to destroy human civilization and how the conduct of war in China represented the future of war.⁷⁹ For

⁷⁷ “The Bombing of Nanking, Sensational First Pictures Illustrate Every Phase of Raid which Shocked the World” (Gaumont British Newsreels, October 25, 1937), “First Pictures of Japan’s Victor[y] March in Chin[a]” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, January 3, 1938), “Sino-Japanese War, Capture of Nanking” (London: British Paramount Newsreels, January 10, 1938), “Japanese Advance into District of Hebei in China” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, October 28, 1937), “Japanese Troops Continue to Advance” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, January 2, 1939), “Aerial Pictures of Japanese Bombing China” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, October 14, 1937), “Chinese Flee as Japanese Bomb Nantao” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, December 16, 1937), and “Sino-Japanese War: 600 Killed in Hankow Raid” (London: British Paramount Newsreels, September 8, 1938).

⁷⁸ “Chungking in Flames after Bombardment by Japanese that Killed 16,000” (London: British Movietone, August 24, 1939), “Japan Continues Air Attack on China” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, September 5, 1938), and “Chapei Bombed by Jap Planes” (London: British Movietone, March 14, 1932). Often, reels portraying aerial warfare were often mixed with images of Japanese ground forces advancing in China. Most reels created a sense of a hapless Chinese population panicking, and fleeing under the weight of an insurmountable Japanese onslaught. All told, newsreels argue that “death and destruction,” partly due to the airplane had become daily life for people living in China.

⁷⁹ “Japanese Continue Aerial Bombardment of Shanghai” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, November 1, 1937). It appears newsreels made a habit of using sensationalized language to describe bombing during the 1930s. One reel alone, “Aerial Pictures of Japanese Bombing of China” makes statements describing it

example, a 1938 Gaumont British Newsreel on the Japanese bombing of Canton clearly stated, “civilization itself is not sufficient protection” against aerial warfare, as it informed British cinemagoers of 3,000 deaths brought on by Japanese terror bombing. Sensationalized language continued through this reel as the narrator referred to bombing as a “hail of death.” In the end, the narrator proclaimed that viewers were witnessing was “modern warfare.”⁸⁰ Sometimes local councils objected to the showing of scenes such as this one being shown in their cinemas. In fact, after these newsreels appeared in Herefordshire, the County Councils Association wrote to the Home Secretary to have such newsreels banned.⁸¹

Newsreel companies also captured the now infamous attack on the Shanghai South Rail Station. It was the top story in Gaumont News’ issue for September 27, 1937. The reel shows the Japanese bombers flying above the city, bombs exploding, and Chinese civilians fleeing. More gripping was their coverage of the devastating aftermath; the rail station is completely rubble, and bodies can be seen in the frame. Even the now iconic crying baby can be seen sitting on the platform screaming. The cameraman and narrator pay the child no special attention.⁸²

Anthony Aldgate has provided a sound and insightful chronicle of the coverage of the Spanish Civil War by British newsreel companies in his *Cinema and History*. In it he

as “indiscriminate murder,” “massacre and mutilation flung from the sky,” and “flight of death.” “Movietone Gives You Aerial War Close Up” (London: British Movietone, April 1, 1934).

⁸⁰ “The Japanese Bomb Canton” (Gaumont British Newsreels, June 30, 1938).

⁸¹ Pronay, “British Newsreels in the 1930s, 2. Their Policies and Impact,” 65.

⁸² “Scenes from the War in China” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, September 27, 1937), “Sino-Japanese War, 1937, Battle of Shanghai” (London: British Paramount Newsreels, November 26, 1937). Children were featured in other newsreels, where they were depicted as “abandoned babies.” “Chinese Flee as Japanese Bomb Nantao” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, December 16, 1937), “Sino-Japanese War: Evacuating of Shanghai” (London: British Paramount Newsreels, December 16, 1937), “China: Shanghai Falls to Japanese, Civilians Caught up in Battle” (London: British Paramount Newsreels, November 25, 1937), and “League of Nations Condemns Japan’s Attack on Shanghai” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, September 30, 1937).

argues that newsreels willingly supported the British government's position on Spain, but above all had a "humanitarian" response to the war, one that emphasized the destruction in Spain.⁸³ An analysis of newsreels depicting aerial warfare supports Aldgate's claims, and reveals the same common threads running through coverage of Ethiopia and China; Francisco Franco's forces were meant to be seen as barbaric and villainous, and aerial warfare brought with it untold horrors. Four cities featured most prominently in coverage of aerial warfare: Guernica, Teruel, Barcelona, and Madrid. Each reel held to a common trope, exemplified by the words of a Gaumont British narrator: "each successive air raid seems more horrible than the last."⁸⁴ As in coverage of China, reels mixed images of civilians fleeing, the dead and wounded in the streets, busy hospitals, wounded in hospital beds, funerals, dead children, rubble collapsing, and airplanes flying overhead, while narrators provided more sensational narration like: "aerial massacre of women and children," or "the spectre of aerial warfare [was] choking the life of one of Europe's major cities."⁸⁵ Still, they were careful to ensure that British cinemagoers left the theatre worrying that such an attack could occur in the UK by telling that no matter who is winning a war involving bombers, everyone ultimately loses.⁸⁶ As in China, these tragedies befell the Spanish despite what newsreels displayed as their extensive

⁸³ Aldgate, *Cinema and History*, 192-193.

⁸⁴ "Madrid Today" (London: British Movietone, September 9, 1937).

⁸⁵ "Four Hundred Civilians Killed in Franco Air Raid" (London: British Paramount Newsreels, June 9, 1938), "Spain: Sensational Exclusive Pictures of Madrid's Worst Air Raid" (London: British Paramount Newsreels, December 31, 1936), "Madrid Reels under Worst Air Raid Yet" (London: British Paramount Newsreels, January 28, 1937), "Four Hundred Civilians Killed in Franco Air Raid" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, September 6, 1938), "Barcelona, Another Terrific Air Raid" (London: British Pathé Newsreels, 1938), "Spanish Nationalist Insurgents Attack Madrid" (November 8, 1936), "Battles of Saragossa and Irun, Spain, during Civil War" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, September 3, 1936), and "Grim Fate of Madrid Brings Home Moral of Air Raid Danger" (London: British Movietone, December 21, 1936).

⁸⁶ "General Franco Bombs Barcelona" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, March 1938) and "Civilians of Teruel, Spain Watch as Bombs Fall" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, January 3, 1938).

preparations for the raids, including the construction of underground shelters, distributing gas masks, pouring cement bunkers, and digging trenches.

The April 1937 bombing of Guernica had particular resonance in Britain and newsreel companies helped capture it.⁸⁷ Gaumont British referred to the bombing of Guernica as the most “terrible [episode] of our modern history” and as a “hell that rained unchecked for five murderous hours.” As in other instances, they were careful to directly relate British cinemagoers with the people of Guernica: “this was a city, these were homes, like yours.”⁸⁸ Aldgate notes that Gaumont British consciously drew a connection between London and Spain.⁸⁹ Picasso’s famous response to the bombing also received newsreel attention in Britain when it was released. At the unveiling Clement Atlee, then Leader of the Opposition, delivered a speech to British Movietone declaring the painting a representation of the “gruesome destruction of Guernica” that symbolized the “the struggle that is going on throughout the world today.” He concluded by calling to attention the importance of 1939, a year that he argued could continue humanity’s descent into barbarism.⁹⁰

As early as 1928, British newsreel companies were issuing stories showing how aerial bombardment could impact Britain.⁹¹ Newsreel support for the RAF and Britain’s air defences only increased after Hitler came to power in 1933 and war became increasingly possible. Newsreels gave new focus to the air forces of Italy and Germany. One Gaumont British reel showed 400 Italian bombers attacking the countryside,

⁸⁷ Patterson, *Guernica and Total War*.

⁸⁸ “Ruins of Guernica After Air Raid” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, May 6, 1937).

⁸⁹ Aldgate, *Cinema and History*, 141.

⁹⁰ “Mr Attlee at Art Exhibition” (London: British Movietone, May 1, 1939).

⁹¹ “RAF Mock Attack Over London” (London: Gaumont Graphic Newsreels, January 1, 1928). A 1928 Gaumont Graphic newsreel showed RAF preparations for an attack over London, in which they warn people of the dangers of aerial attack, but they consistently maintain that the RAF and the territorial forces will be able to defend them.

displaying what it argued was a “vivid picture” of what a raid against a defenceless country would look like.⁹² British Paramount also showcased the power of the Luftwaffe and what they portrayed as the militarization of German society.⁹³

There was, however, a noticeable shift in tone of newsreels starting in the mid-1930s. From the mid-1930s, instead of providing abstract stories about London being attacked, newsreels started to focus on tangible threats to Britain and used these stories to try to draw recruits to ARP and other service organizations. The theme of drawing new recruits for ARP and other services would become the overwhelming theme of these newsreels after the *Anschluss*, and will be discussed in greater detail in chapter seven. Volunteerism was important to newsreels trying to show viewers that their country could be defended against attack. These early 1930s reels, some produced nine years before the outbreak of the Second World War, contain many of the themes that inundated British newsreel programmes in 1938 and 1939: they tell people to run and take cover; they show bombers overhead; they assure viewers that the RAF, the Territorial Army, and volunteers will protect them.⁹⁴

According to newsreel companies, the government could also handle widely feared gas attacks. Decontamination squads from both civilian volunteers and the military were portrayed as dutiful and efficient, quickly cleaning contaminated streets after gas drills.⁹⁵ Should, however, gas reach a civilian’s residence, Sir Malcolm Campbell, celebrity racer and motorist, provided instructions using newsreels on how to

⁹² “Italian Air Force Bombing Display” (London: Gaumont British newsreels, May 12, 1936).

⁹³ “German Thanksgiving in 1936” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, May 12, 1936).

⁹⁴ “Air Raid Practice for Kent” (London: British Movietone, September 11, 1937) and “Mock Air Attack on London” (London: Gaumont British, August 11, 1937).

⁹⁵ “Air Raid Precautions include Black Out Practice” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, November 8, 1937) and “Anti-Gas Moral for Navy Week Shows” (London: British Movietone, August 1, 1937).

gas-proof one room in the house using household supplies.⁹⁶ Or, such preparation would not be necessary if you lived in new London flats that were constructed with gas rooms for residents. They contained backup diesel generators, special air filters, and “submarine” air locks. British Movietone portrayed these new flats as an example of how British civilians and builders could help prepare the country for war.⁹⁷ They also showed that foreign countries were preparing for aerial warfare. For example, Bombay, Tokyo, Paris, and Berlin were shown preparing for aerial attacks much the same way the British civilian population was in newsreels between 1936 and 1938.⁹⁸ In each case, newsreels depicted foreign civilians and their governments as having the same level of dedication to ARP as those in Britain.

As alluded to in chapters two and five, gas was a near-universal fear in Europe during the interwar period. Almost all countries, from Germany and Italy to the Soviet Union deeply feared gas attacks from the air; Britain was no exception.⁹⁹ Fittingly, gas also featured prominently in depictions of ARP measures in newsreels even before war scares became more acute after the *Anschluss*. At the 1937 Mayor of Westminster’s

⁹⁶ “Official Method of Proofing a Room against Gas” (London: British Movietone, March 15, 1937) and “Others Take a Hand in Anti-Raid Dig-out Policy Started by Sir Malcolm Campbell” (London: British Movietone, January 2, 1937).

⁹⁷ “New Block of London Flats Set Example with Gas Room” (London: British Movietone, March 15, 1937).

⁹⁸ “Air Raid Precautions” (London: British Pathé, 1937), “Air Raid Exercises in Paris” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, October 22, 1936), “Japan Stages Great Anti-Air Raid test” (London: British Movietone, July 7, 1933), “Mock Air Raid on Japan” (London: British Movietone, August 27, 1934), “All Japan Practices Anti-Air Raid Drill” (London: British Movietone, August 20, 1938), “Air Raid Rehearsal in Berlin Provides Lessons in Defence” (London: British Movietone, September 23, 1937), “Mock Air Raid in Bombay” (London: British Movietone, January 27, 1938), “Gas – Gay Paris” (London: British Movietone, October 22, 1936), “Tokyo Conducts Air Raid Training” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, January 9, 1936), “Italian Kids Gas Drill” (London: British Movietone, December 3, 1936), “Japs Into Gas Masks” (London: British Movietone, July 30, 1936), and “Berlin People are Given a Realistic Taste of an Air Raid” (London: British Movietone, March 28, 1935).

⁹⁹ Brian Balmer, *Britain and Biological Warfare* (London: Palgrave, 2001), Frederic R. Brown, *Chemical Warfare: A Study in Restraint* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), and Edward M. Spiers, *Chemical Warfare* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

review of ARP volunteers in Marylebone all of the volunteers were sporting gas masks.¹⁰⁰ A British Pathé newsreel showed how seriously the government was taking gas, enough to manufacture enough gas masks for the entire civilian population. Geoffrey Lloyd, the Under-Secretary for the Home Office, when touring a gas mask factory in Blackburn states that he believes “everyone ought to have a gas mask, whether rich or poor.”¹⁰¹ He informs viewers that the gas masks will protect them from every type of gas “known to the government.”¹⁰² The workers in gas mask factories were also portrayed as setting a good example for the people of Britain by drilling for an attack.¹⁰³

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that even before Europe began its cascade of diplomatic crises in early 1938, aerial warfare was already occupying the minds of the government and the people, and was appearing on cinema screens. Additionally, this period also served to establish the critical themes that would appear in newsreels in the eighteen months before the start of the Second World War: the need for volunteers, the importance of nationalism and perseverance, exploiting fear about bombardment, and that Britain could defend itself against an attack. At the same time, British National, when hired by the Government to produce *The Warning*, moved to correct some of the mistakes made by Gaumont-British. Additionally, unlike previous years, the next chapter will show that the film had a real impact on British air defence recruitment.

¹⁰⁰ “Mayor Inspects Air Raid Precaution Services at Marylebone” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, April 15, 1937).

¹⁰¹ “Air Raid Precautions” (London: British Pathé Newsreels, January 1937).

¹⁰² “Gas Masks” (London: British Movietone, January 14, 1937).

¹⁰³ “Harrogate Sets Good Example in Matter of Gas Drill” (London: British Movietone, January 18, 1937).

Readying for the Inevitable: Air Raid Precautions, Air War on the Screen, and *The Warning*, 1938-1939

“The picture you have just seen has given you an idea of the Horrors of Modern War”

-- Sir John Anderson, Lord Privy Seal in *The Warning*

This chapter will show that as Europe slipped closer to another conflict, the airplane continued to act as both source of fear for the British population and a nationalistic rallying point for the government. It will first look at the rapid expansion of ARP throughout 1938 and 1939. Second, it will show how newsreels conveyed similar themes about aerial bombardment as before the *Anschluss*, but appeared in much greater number until the start of the war, spiking during the Munich and Czechoslovakian Crises in autumn 1938 and spring 1939, respectively. Finally, the 1939 air defence film *The Warning* will be examined similarly to *The Gap*. Fortunately, unlike with *The Gap*, ARP left a solid record of how the how film was received and it may have affected recruitment across London.

The Growth of ARP and Civil Defence, 1938-1939

The experience of the Spanish Civil War did nothing to ease British fears of the bomber – if anything it made them worse. After April 1937, print and newsreel reporting on the bombing in the Spanish Civil War provided the Home Office and Air Ministry

with what they thought was confirmation of the fifty-casualty rule.¹ Using these overblown estimations of the destruction caused by an air attack, the Home Office argued they needed about 1.4 million part-time volunteers. Yet, they, and the still-small ARP department, were struggling to find recruits for the service.² Naturally, mobilising such a percentage of the British population even on a part-time basis required more than the mere tacit complicity of the local authorities; they would have to be legislated to cooperate, and were with the 1937 ARP bill. In it the government agreed to cover sixty to seventy-five percent of the costs associated with local councils establishing ARP organizations and defence schemes. During the parliamentary debates on the bill, the Under Secretary of State to the Home Office, Sir Russell Scott, trumpeted the psychological importance of ARP to the British people.³ However, some historians, notably Neville Jones, have argued the ARP bill was of more psychological importance to the British government than to the British people.⁴

The real turning points for ARP and civil defence came in 1938. Throughout the year the department staff and budget grew rapidly. The office's staff number increased to 360 from the less than 50 in 1936, and its budget increased from £640,000 in 1935-36 to £830,000 in 1938. In March, in the wake of the German *Anschluss* against Austria, Sir Samuel Hoare, the Home Secretary, made prime-time radio broadcasts calling for one million volunteers for the service. The British press took hold of the story. Additionally, another print campaign was launched including posters and the pamphlet *What Can You*

¹ O'Brien, *Civil Defence*, 172. Over the course of the war 230 raids by mostly Italian and some German air forces had caused massive destruction in Spain. More specifically, during March 1938 forty-four tons of bombs caused about 3,000 casualties, 1,000 of which were fatalities.

² O'Brien, *Civil Defence*, 97 & 100.

³ House of Commons Debates, November 25 & 30, 1937.

⁴ Jones, *The Beginnings of Strategic Air Power*, 35-37.

Do?, which specifically instructed civilians how they could contribute to home defence.⁵ Along with new pamphlets, new editions of previous brochures such as *Personal Protection against Gas*, *First Aid and Nursing of Gas Casualties*, *The Organisation of Decontamination Services*, and *Anti-Gas Training* were circulated. Public demonstrations were held, including at the Empire Exhibition in Glasgow. ARP organizers started to persuade local churches and newspapers to help them bring in volunteers. At the same time, even when theatres were not showing home defence films or newsreels related to home defence (admittedly most of the time), ARP groups, St. John Ambulance volunteers, and other home defence workers were instructed to ask local theatres for permission to make presentations to audiences before the start of their programmes or set up ARP displays in lobbies.⁶ Essentially, the cinema was a site for the recruitment of volunteers, even when ARP films were not being shown. Still, through the summer of 1938, recruitment numbers were well below what the government wanted – only about half of the required 1.14 million volunteers had enlisted, and even many of those were unreliable recruits, due to their lack of training or commitment. Yet, recruitment for volunteer organizations related to defence against gas was proceeding on schedule.

The Munich Crisis was the real watershed moment for ARP. As Neville Chamberlain returned from Germany declaring “peace for our time,” the Home Office hurried to prepare the British population for what seemed like an increasingly probable conflict with Nazi Germany. The sincerity of Chamberlain’s enthusiasm on his return to Heston Aerodrome can also be questioned. Shortly after the crisis in October, he

⁵ O’Brien, *Civil Defence*, 127-29.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

promoted Sir John Anderson from the Home Office directly into the Cabinet as the Lord Privy Seal and Minister of Civil Defence, with the sole responsibility of preparing home (air) defences. Ultimately, he would become Home Secretary in September 1939.⁷ He would be supervising a much larger ARP department, one that now employed 688 in the Home Office, over 2,000 all over country, and had a budget of over £1.1 million.⁸ As ARP accelerated preparations of home defence, local boroughs hastened their own preparations and started to distribute gas masks to civilians. The Home Office also dramatically increased expenditures for home defences not relating to ARP, including more Anderson Shelters, and home modifications.⁹ At the same time, the Air Staff started to issue more foreboding predictions of aerial destruction, based on their estimates of the increasing power of the Luftwaffe; it was now thought it could drop 3,500 tons of explosives on London within twenty-four hours of the outbreak of war. As with past estimates, these assessments were largely conjectural and were proven unfounded once the war began. The government, including the Prime Minister, felt that Britain's home defences were "far from complete."¹⁰ Equally important, the Munich Crisis also signalled a shift in British public opinion regarding war and air attack from extreme pessimism and helplessness to a stronger sense of duty and defence. As noted earlier, before the Munich Crisis, ARP had enlisted the help of only 500,000 part-time volunteers. By the end of 1938, only three months after the Munich Crisis, the number of ARP

⁷ In fact, during the Second World War, Anderson was chosen by Churchill to be his replacement as Prime Minister should he or Anthony Eden be killed.

⁸ O'Brien, *Civil Defence*, 119.

⁹ Anderson Shelters were corrugated steel shelters that could be partially buried or used above ground. The shelters were designed to be buried in back gardens and covered in soil. Being able to hold four people, it was thought they could protect families in the event of an attack.

¹⁰ House of Commons Debates, November 1, 1938.

volunteers had more than doubled to approximately 1.14 million.¹¹ Indeed, by this point ARP had enlisted more members than the other services combined, even if its volunteers were poorly equipped, trained, and organized, and lacking the discipline and traditions of the Army, RAF, and Royal Navy. Additionally, it appears ARP volunteers were driven more by spontaneity and were difficult to keep in the service. Despite the post-Munich boom in recruiting, the Home Office launched a new recruitment campaign, emphasising people's civic duty to perform "national service" and volunteer, preferably for ARP. By early 1939, ARP was starting to compete with other services, such as fire brigades, police, nursing, ambulances, and the merchant marine, as well as the fighting services, for manpower.¹²

The Prime Minister himself launched the new campaign in January 1939 with a radio broadcast. Intense newspapers, print, and film advertising continued until the outbreak of war with Germany. Included in this were newsreels, the release of *The Warning*, and the publication of the National Service Guide outlining how civilians could help the country prepare for war. According to Terrence O'Brien, the publicity campaign worked well for the government, but there were still not enough volunteers. In some areas, ARP actually had surpluses of volunteers, while in others there were serious deficiencies. Regrettably for ARP, there were more volunteers in rural areas than in the cities, where air defences were most needed. Ultimately, ARP would enter September 1939 understaffed in critical areas like London.¹³

¹¹ O'Brien, *Civil Defence*, 203.

¹² *Ibid.*, 204.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 201-208.

Newsreels and Aerial Bombardment, March 1938 to August 1939

There was a dramatic increase in the number of newsreels centred on air raids after March 1938. By early 1938, the dangers of aerial bombardment had been well established in the British public sphere. *Things to Come* and *The Gap* had been released two years previously, British newsreel companies had been chronicling the dangers of aerial warfare, and novels in bookstores and exposés in the dailies continued to appear. The fighting in Spain continued to serve as a strong reminder to the people of Britain of the threat posed by aerial war. However, images from Spain were sometimes used to show Britons that the determination and resilience of civilians could get them through an attack.¹⁴ Newsreels proved to be an important forum for the government to remind civilians that although the airplane was highly destructive, it could be stopped. According to newsreels shown after the *Anschluss*, three important things would enable Britain to withstand German air attacks: air raid shelter construction, gas preparation, and, above all, volunteerism and British nationalism. All these would come together in effective drilling and training for what seemed like the inevitable air raid. In addition to these civilian tasks and characteristics, as noted in chapter four, the RAF was depicted as being central to defending the country.¹⁵

Air raid shelters featured prominently in newsreels discussing aerial war. The construction of shelters, as depicted in newsreels, showed British cinemagoers that air raids could be survived, and not only what the British government was doing to protect

¹⁴ “Defence Air Raid Precautions in England and Europe” (London: British Paramount Newsreels, January 1, 1938), and “Interview with Sir Samuel Hoare” (London: British Movietone, March 24, 1939).

¹⁵ “RAF Demonstration at Northolt” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, May 29, 1939).

civilians, but what civilians could do to protect themselves.¹⁶ A 1938 British Paramount interview with scientist J. B. S. Haldane correctly argued that the real danger from aerial bombardment was high explosives, not gas. Through newsreels he tried to persuade the British government to spend rearmament funds on shelters rather than on the RAF.¹⁷

After February 1939, Anderson Shelters started to be distributed to the civilian population, beginning in London. The distribution of these shelters was portrayed by newsreel companies as large-scale operations from their manufacture in Cardiff to their distribution by working-class men and the unemployed in neighbourhoods such as King's Cross.¹⁸ They were depicted as providing a safe haven for those with back gardens, even if their homes were destroyed.¹⁹ For people who earned less than 5p per week the shelters would be provided free of charge.²⁰

The government also used newsreels to promote their portable air raid shelters. Shaped like oversized bells, they were able to hold four people and were strong enough to resist the side of a brick house falling on them, or a 500lb bomb exploding nearby.²¹ For those who could not take refuge in a portable shelter, or an Anderson shelter, Nissen huts

¹⁶ "Wanted – A Shelter Policy" (London: British Movietone, October 27, 1938). Geoffrey Lloyd frequently used British Movietone reels to press the National Government on issues surrounding ARP and air defence, his pet project. See also "Mr Lloyd at Birmingham" (London: British Movietone, October 3, 1938). In this reel, Lloyd argued that the recent Munich Crisis had shown that ARP required the "urgent care of the government." At the same time, his newsreel company, British Movietone, applauded him for the "magnificent start" he had undertaken in building Britain's defences.

¹⁷ "Air Raid Precautions" (London: British Paramount Newsreels, October 13, 1938).

¹⁸ "Deep Dug-Outs" (London: British Movietone, February 3, 1939). Movietone's campaign was not limited to Anderson Shelters. Under the leadership of Geoffrey Lloyd, they claimed to be campaigning for shelters and dugouts to be built in every schoolyard, on major roads, and in all major parks.

¹⁹ "Anderson Shelters in Bombing Tests" (London: British Movietone, February 16, 1939).

²⁰ "ARP 'Tents' Tested at Birmingham" (London: British Movietone, February 13, 1939), and "London: Bomb Proof Shelters at Millbank for Civilians" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, February 16, 1939).

²¹ "Air Ministry and Home Office Officials Watch Successful Tests of ARP Shelters in Birmingham" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, February 13, 1939), "Portable ARP Shelters Tested" (London: British Paramount Newsreels, February 13, 1939), "Air Raid Shelter at Millbank" (London: British Movietone, February 20, 1939), "ARP Test Demonstration of Anti-time Bomb Device at Hounslow" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, February 13, 1939), and "Rushing the ARP Steel Orders, ARP Materials Made in Cardiff" (London: British Movietone, June 2, 1936).

(temporary semi-circular corrugated metal huts) and numerous large public shelters were erected, and trenches dug across the country, some were even described as “first class accommodation to be bombed in.”²² According to newsreels, some of London’s most famous parks, including Hyde and St. James’s were the sites of extensive trench works – a sign of how far the country was going to defend itself.²³ Large employers and institutions, like the BBC and Eton College, were digging trenches or building shelters on their grounds.²⁴

Newsreels showcased British manufacturers, such as EKCO Radios, Standard Telephone, and Stork Margarine, sharing in the responsibility of protecting the country from aerial attack. They were presented as shining examples of what would happen in British factories should war come. Women workers move quickly and calmly like “ants on a summer’s day” to underground shelters large enough to hold 3,000 people, while others work as ARP wardens or fire fighters.²⁵ In each case, they return to work calmly. A visit to a Fairey Aviation factory in Birmingham by George VI featured a tour of an air

²² “ Air Raid Precautions in Horse Guards Parade – Trench Digging in St. James’s Park” (London: British Movietone, September 29, 1938), “Trenches or Dug-Outs, Trench Digging Shadwell” (London: British Movietone October 20, 1938), “Mr. Morrison at Clapham Common” (London: British Movietone, November 21, 1938), “Sir John Anderson Inspects Concrete ARP Bunkers in Islington” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, January 26, 1939), and “Nissen Air Raid Shelters” (London: British Movietone, July 3, 1939). British Paramount also issued reels showing the digging of air raid trenches in Paris, stating that the “formerly gay capital” had to resort to such measures. “Paris Digs Bomb Shelter Trenches Around the City” (London: British Paramount, January 1, 1938) and “France, Air Raid Precaution Trenches” (London: British Paramount, January 1, 1939).

²³ “Air Raid Precautions in England and Europe” (London: British Paramount, January 1, 1938).

²⁴ “Opening New BBC Headquarters” (London: British Movietone, November 21, 1938), “Eton Makes ARP Preparations” (London: British Movietone, October 6, 1938). Ideas were even floated in newsreels from turning every car park in Britain into an underground air raid shelter. “Auger Car Park Model” (London: British Movietone, February 20, 1939).

²⁵ “Standard Telephone – ARP” (London: British Movietone, July 20, 1939), “ARP Efficiency at New Southgate” (London: British Movietone, July 20, 1939), and “Factory Evacuation Practice” (London: British Movietone, October 20, 1938).

raid shelter and ARP equipment. The consistent message was that Britain's factories would endure bombing with the same resilience as the civilian population.²⁶

Newsreel companies tried to appeal directly to cinemagoers' patriotism and to what they perceived as British fortitude. Government officials often featured prominently in newsreel stories on air raid shelters. Large community shelters were setup all over the south of London. Mayors and Royals were often featured in newsreels introducing cinemagoers to the protective features and amenities of new air raid shelters, like the massive shelter complex at Ramsgate.²⁷ According to Geoffrey Lloyd, Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the only defence for Great Britain was through the government, councils, and the civilian population rallying under the flag. Civilian volunteering, across class-lines, for national service was depicted as crucial: "tinker, tailor, rich man, poor man" were all asked to volunteer for ARP and show enemies that the Empire was "not asleep."²⁸ In a newsreel in January 1938, before both the *Anschluss* and Munich, Lloyd declared that there was "no security until the entire nation is trained in anti air raid precautions."²⁹ These calls became stronger during the

²⁶ "Industrial ARP" (London: British Pathé Newsreels, February 1939), "ARP Drill in Factory in Southend" (London: British Movietone, February 9, 1939), and "Royalty in Birmingham" (London: British Movietone, February 3, 1939).

²⁷ According to British Movietone, it was able to hold 60,000 civilians, all of whom would be 200 yards from an exit. "Duke of Kent Opens Bomb Proof Underground Shelter" (London: British Paramount Newsreels, June 5, 1939), "Duke of Kent at Ramsgate" (London: British Movietone, May 6, 1939), "Westminster Air Raid Shelters Exhibition" (London: British Pathé Newsreels, 1939), "First Air Raid Shelters Demonstrated at Caxton Hall" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, February 14, 1938), and "Duke of Kent Opens Bomb Proof Underground Shelter" (London: British Paramount Newsreels, June 5, 1939).

²⁸ "Our Roving Camera Reports" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, July 4, 1938) and "Britain Carries On as Usual during WWII" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, July 6, 1939).

²⁹ "Air Raid Practise" (London: British Movietone, January 4, 1938).

Anschluss and Munich Crisis, which was to many the clearest warning that Britain needed to prepare for war.³⁰

After the crisis had subsided, the government continued to push its home defence message through newsreels. Herbert Morrison, Member of Parliament for Hackney South and Leader of the London County Council, tried to tap into popular guilt by wishing more volunteers had enlisted before Munich. He went on to argue that there is now only a temporary peace and that people must come forward to complete London's air defences. In the same reel, the celebrated author and correspondent John Langdon-Davies asserted that "mental preparation," volunteerism and reading ARP manuals were the best defence.³¹ Similar reels echoed the sentiment, arguing that only keeping Britain strong through volunteerism and national service would prevent another war. Vernon Bartlett, another well-known correspondent and anti-appeasement advocate, in a British Paramount newsreel said this voluntary service was a sign of the changing political climate and the only way to protect democracies. As such, it was the responsibility of everyone who could to volunteer.³² When yet another crisis arose, this time the one that would lead to war in September 1939, British newsreels offered more of this promotion of national preparedness. Gaumont British showed the King and the Duke of Kent returning from abroad, and London's museums hiding their most precious holdings. Their narrator declared that only "preparations," "readiness," and "liberty" will protect

³⁰ "Britain Prepares for Possibility of War" (London: British Gaumont Newsreels, September 29, 1938) and "Sir Samuel Hoare" (London: British Movietone, September 5, 1938).

³¹ "Defence: Air Raid Precautions" (London: British Paramount Newsreels, October 13, 1938).

³² "British Public Service Announcement for Air Raid Precautions and Territorial Services" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, October 3, 1938), "Postscript on ARP – Leicester Siren" (London: British Movietone, October 6, 1938), "Air Raid Precautions" (London: British Paramount Newsreels, October 13, 1938). Bartlett was elected to Parliament in 1938 as an independent left-wing anti-appeasement candidate in Bridgewater, Somerset.

Britain.³³ A British Movietone reel appealed to British masculinity by telling viewers “the work of a volunteer is a real man’s job.”³⁴

Beyond harnessing nationalism at times of crisis, newsreels also tried to encourage volunteers by showcasing ARP service rallies, reviews, and parades, and Royal appeals for service, and by explaining the *National Service Guide*. For example, newsreels showcased an air raid exhibition in London in 1938, a sold-out Royal Albert Hall national service rally in January 1939, and large 20,000-attendee rallies in Hyde Park in March and June 1939. The critical players in government usually attended the rallies: Sir John Anderson, Sir Kingsley Wood, Herbert Morrison, and Ernest Brown (MP and Minister of Labour), or even the King and Queen, in the case of the June rally at Hyde Park. British Movietone called the Hyde Park display an “impressive response to the national call, a great demonstration of the spirit of service.”³⁵ Newsreel coverage of rallies often involved nationalistic displays and cheers, and singing “Jerusalem” and “God Save the King.” Sir John Anderson concluded the January rally at Royal Albert Hall with a speech stating that rallies like this showed what “a free people is prepared to do in defence of their liberties.”³⁶ British Movietone newsreels also showcased the

³³ “Britain Undertakes Sweeping for War” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, August 28, 1939). Other reels contained equally strong language. Sir Malcolm Campbell argued that people volunteering for ARP were “learning the fundamentals of self preservation” “ARP in Leicester Square” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, July 4, 1938).

³⁴ “Civil Defence Trailer” (London: British Movietone, August 29, 1939).

³⁵ “King and Queen at National Service Rally” (London: British Movietone, June 7, 1939).

³⁶ “Opening of Air Raid Equipment Exhibition” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, April 7, 1938), “National Service Rally at the Albert Hall” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, January 26, 1939), “National Service Campaign – Albert Hall Rally” (London: British Movietone, January 26, 1939), “Mr. H. Belisha Visits Bermondsey” (London: British Movietone, March 4, 1939), “ARP Recruiting Rally at Hampden Park, Glasgow” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, undated), “Civil and Military Defence Parade in Hyde Park” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, undated), “National Service Day Drive by Celebrities” (London: British Paramount Newsreels, March 30, 1939), and “King Reviews National Service Volunteers” (London: British Paramount Newsreels, July 6, 1939).

National Service Guide along with the rallies, telling viewers “the call to national service has gone forward.”³⁷

Based on coverage of services parades, this appears to have been a message the British people were paying attention to – or, at least, newsreel portrayed it in that way. Crowds at least four deep attended a parade of Fire Brigade and ARP volunteers in London in March 1939 who then listened to Sir Kingsley Wood give a speech on how the volunteers represented Britain’s “spirit of service” and a willingness of the free people of the world to stand against tyranny.³⁸ Herbert Morrison’s speech after a fireman’s parade through London seemed to invoke the same themes: “[We are] showing the world [that] British representative institutions, British self-government, and British democracy have behind them the spirit of service – free adhesion to the needs of London and the needs of the nation.”³⁹

Britain’s women were also expected to participate in the nation’s volunteering spirit. They were told by at least one newsreel that they could maintain their femininity while doing so.⁴⁰ In March 1938, Sir Samuel Hoare used British Movietone to try to draw in as many as one million women volunteers for ARP.⁴¹ Lady Reading, the founder of the Women’s Royal Voluntary Service, speaking before Pathé, Paramount, and Gaumont cameras told women to cooperate along with their men and continue with their

³⁷ *The National Service Guide* was distributed throughout Great Britain. It listed the services that civilians could join to support national service, like ARP, the police, fire brigades, military, merchant marine, Women’s Land Army, and the nursing services. O’Brien, *Civil Defence*, 204. “Printing of National Service Guide” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, January 16, 1939) and “National Service Cut-ins” (London: British Movietone, January 30, 1939).

³⁸ “Herbert Morrison Addresses Parade of London’s Auxiliary Fire Service Volunteers” (London: British Paramount Newsreels, March 9, 1939).

³⁹ “Mr. Morrison and AFS” (London: British Movietone, March 9, 1939).

⁴⁰ “AFS Uniforms for Ladies” (London: British Movietone, August 12, 1938).

⁴¹ “Interview with Sir Samuel Hoare” (London: British Movietone, March 24, 1938). Women were also called upon to drive ambulances in times of crisis. “Civil Defence Trailer” (London: British Movietone, August 28, 1939).

“self-imposed duties.” She went on to argue that a demonstration of strength by Britain’s women would help deter any possible aggressor and prevent Britain from suffering the fate of China and Spain. Though Lady Reading advocated for women volunteers for ARP, in separate newsreels she also tried to show women how they needed to care for their children while under attack.⁴² Additionally, women were expected to keep house during a raid, while also aiding ARP. A 1938 British Movietone reel showed how women could still “make the old man’s supper” in a gas proof kitchen. In rare cases, women were shown as competent Civil Air Guard pilots.⁴³

Britain’s population could also prepare itself for air raids by familiarising themselves with gas precautions and gas masks. Numerous reels showed cinemagoers the lengths to which the government was going to protect them from gas attacks. For example, newsreel coverage of the Munich Crisis focused on the distribution of gas masks to the British population. Reels informed viewers that they needed to go to gas fitting stations, like one in Woolwich, where they would be fitted for and given one of the millions of gas masks that were being produced all over the country.⁴⁴ Right to the outbreak of the Second World War newsreel companies showed viewers how “gas mask factories are working overtime with the knowledge that thousands of enemy planes could spread out over the land and cover it with a blanket of poison gas. Such an attack would

⁴² “Lady Reading Appeals for Women Air Raid Precaution Wardens” (London: British Paramount Newsreels, 1938) and “Lady Reading Speaks on ARP” (London: British Pathé Newsreels, 1939). Sir Samuel Hoare and Edward Grigg, Conservative MP for Altrincham made similar appeals in a Paramount newsreel in 1938. “Air Raid Precautions” (London: British Paramount Newsreels, October 13, 1938) and “Lady Reading and Child Care ARP” (London: British Movietone, March 4, 1939).

⁴³ “Kitchen ARP Shelter” (London: British Movietone, September 26, 1938) and “CAG Inspection” (London: British Movietone, February 23, 1939).

⁴⁴ “The Gas Mask Store” (London: British Pathé Newsreels, 1938). It can be reasonably assumed, given the nature of other newsreel coverage that this particular reel was released either in spring 1938 or, more likely, September.

paralyze the life of the country.”⁴⁵ The government also produced and distributed gas masks for children and babies, and ARP prams for young parents; these prams, according to British Movietone, could keep a child protected from gas should their parent chose to go to the shop during a gas attack.⁴⁶ Gas masks were also made available to British children, shown smiling as they cheerfully were fitted for masks the narrator stated would protect them from “evil.”⁴⁷ In a newsreel showing the distribution of gas masks at St. Pancras, British Movietone described children in gas masks as a sign of an “appalling chapter in history.”⁴⁸ Gas-proof kennels even made an appearance in newsreels, and at least one wedding was performed while being gassed on camera.⁴⁹

Cinemagoers also received instruction on how to prepare for gas attacks in their homes. At the government’s Anti-Gas School in Yorkshire, Under-Secretary for the Home Office Geoffrey Lloyd toured the “chlorine cottage” with British Pathé cameras rolling. Lloyd shows viewers how they can use basic household items, and only a “few pence” to gas proof their residence. He then emerges from the gas cottage declaring confidently that he “didn’t smell a whiff.”⁵⁰ Usually, newsreel surveys of bomb shelter construction reminded viewers that they too could withstand gas attacks.⁵¹

⁴⁵ “Air Raid Precautions” (London: British Pathé Newsreels, 1939) and “New Gas Masks for London” (London: British Pathé, 1939).

⁴⁶ “ARP Pram” (London: British Movietone, December 12, 1938), “Gas Masks for Babies” (London: British Pathé, 1939), and “Gas Helmets for Babies” (London: British Movietone, March 16, 1939).

⁴⁷ “Children in Gas Masks” (London: British Movietone, September 22, 1938) and “Gas Mask Distribution” (London: September 29, 1938).

⁴⁸ “Be Prepared” (London: British Movietone, August 28, 1939).

⁴⁹ “Gas-Proof Kennel for Dogs” (London: March 6, 1939) and “ARP Wedding” (London: British Movietone, September 26, 1938).

⁵⁰ “ARP at Easingwold” (London: British Movietone, April 14, 1938), and “Air Raid Precautions in Yorkshire” (London: British Pathé Newsreels, 1938).

⁵¹ “First Air Raid Shelters Demonstrated at Caxton Hall” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, February 14, 1938), “Children Carrying Gas Masks” (London: British Movietone, September 24, 1938), and “Gas Masks for Babies” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, March 16, 1939).

As noted in chapter four, the RAF conducted number of war games in the late 1930s to prepare for what seemed like the inevitable aerial attack from Germany. According to newsreels, they usually involved a fictional force trying to penetrate London's defences, and also involved civilian volunteers manning defences on the ground such as searchlights, AA batteries, and balloon barrages. Of course, these reels were always meant to try to inspire volunteers, sometimes boldly asking viewers if they "might feel like doing something about it."⁵² In one appeal for defence volunteers, Sir Kingsley Wood called for an additional 5,000 men between the ages of thirty-five and fifty to operate the barrage balloons around London, claiming that once enough volunteers were found, London would be safe from attack.⁵³

In the event that the RAF failed to prevent the bombing of British cities, newsreel coverage of ARP tests and drills was meant to show cinemagoers that ARP, Auxiliary Fire Service, Ambulance Service, Home Guard, and Territorial Army volunteers were prepared to minimize the damage and aid casualties and the homeless. ARP practice in Nottingham in 1938 was said to have been "almost as dangerous as the real thing," and a rehearsal in Kensington was described as "war" and a "realistic" portrayal of bombardment: wardens were shown rushing to the scene of a bomb explosion, ordering people to close their windows and doors, and tending to destroyed buildings; ambulance

⁵² "Regulars Come to London to Strengthen Defences as Anti-Aircraft Units" (London: Gaumont British, February 13, 1939), "Regulars Man AA Section at Woolwich" (London: British Movietone, February 3, 1939), "Gun Practice at Lydd" (London: British Movietone, February 4, 1939), "AA Guns" (London: British Movietone, April 20, 1939), and "Floodlit Balloon Barrage Over London" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, March 2, 1939).

⁵³ "Balloon Barrage" (London: British Movietone, December 5, 1938), "Auxiliary Air Force Demonstrates Balloon Barrage at Romford" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, January 26, 1939), "Air Minister Inspects Balloon Barrage" (London: British Movietone, August 9, 1938), "Barrage Balloons Go Up Over London" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, October 10, 1938), "Sir Kingsley Wood Visits Barrage Balloons at Kidbrooke" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, September 8, 1938), "Balloon Barrage test Over London" (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, July 31, 1939), and "Air Raid & Black Out" (London: British Movietone, August 14, 1939).

parties attended to simulated casualties; gas decontamination squads cleaned the streets; and fire brigades put out fires.⁵⁴ The realism, it was said, would help prepare ARP volunteers.⁵⁵ ARP also used newsreels to show cinemagoers that should they or their families be injured, help would be there for them in the form of mobile hospitals or collapsible ambulances that were fully staffed by doctors and nurses.⁵⁶ The overarching theme of all these newsreels was that London would remain “well under control” in the event of an attack, thanks to the ever-growing numbers of volunteers.⁵⁷

All told, newsreel depictions of air raids in Britain in the eighteen months leading up to the Second World War gave British civilians reasons to fear aerial attack, but their portrayal was a far cry from the apocalypse depicted in feature films such as *Things to Come*, or in newsreel coverage of the Spanish Civil War. Instead, newsreel coverage of aerial bombardment may well have left cinemagoers feeling their country was well prepared to defend itself against and respond to aerial bombardment. There was, in the words of British Pathé, “reasonable preparation against real danger.”⁵⁸ A September 2, 1939, British Movietone newsreel neatly summarized the tone of British newsreel

⁵⁴ “Air Raid Practice” (London: British Movietone, February 14, 1938), “Big London ARP Test” (London: British Pathé Newsreels, 1939), and “Realistic ARP Test” (London: British Pathé Newsreels, 1939). The narrator in this particular reel, “Realistic ARP Test,” said the tests were so real people would have thought a real war was on. Ironically, the reel featured “more blood, and more bodies” at Bethnal Green Tube Station, the site of the disastrous crush on March 3, 1943 that killed 173 people. “Warden’s Demonstration of Air Raid Patrol [sic] (ARP) in London” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, June 8, 1939), “London Auxiliary Fire Brigade” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, March 9, 1939), “Evacuation Rehearsal” (London: British Movietone, August 31, 1939), and “Neville Chamberlain to Meet at Munich in Last Effort to Avert War” (London: British Paramount, September 29, 1938).

⁵⁵ “Air Raid Precautions Practice at Nottingham” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, May 19, 1938), “ARP in Nottingham” (May 19, 1938), “ARP in Kensington” (London: British Movietone, May 30, 1938), “Mr Geoffrey Lloyd at ARP School” (London: British Paramount Newsreels, April 14, 1938), “Appeal for Stretcher Bearers and Ambulance Drivers” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, August 28, 1939), and “Taxi with AFS Equipment” (London: British Movietone, November 21, 1938).

⁵⁶ “Collapsible ARP Ambulance Unveiled” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, December 19, 1939), “Travelling Hospital for ARP Work” (London: British Paramount Newsreels, March 9, 1939), and “Southport, New ARP Mobile Station” (London: British Pathé Newsreels, 1939).

⁵⁷ “Wandsworth House Burnt for Firefighting Practice” (London: Gaumont British Newsreels, October 17, 1938).

⁵⁸ “ARP Air Raid Precautions” (London, British Pathé, 1939).

depictions of aerial warfare in the last two years of the 1930s. Released the day before Britain declared war on Nazi Germany, it depicts Britain as a country ready to meet the new challenges of aerial warfare. The “swift fighters” of the RAF were ready to engage enemy bombers that entered British air space. So too were AA batteries and barrage balloons, fully staffed by volunteers. Should the defences be penetrated, the reel demonstrated that Britain would indeed be able to keep calm and carry on as every man, woman, and child was equipped with gas masks. More importantly, the people of Britain had answered the call for national service and were ready to help the country absorb an attack.⁵⁹ According to Movietone and their contemporaries, Britain could take it.

The Conceptualization and Production of *The Warning*

The Warning was released on March 15, 1939, in the midst of worsening international tensions, the new recruitment campaign, and increased newsreel coverage of aerial bombardment issues. The film was part of a larger publicity blitz mounted by the British government to encourage enrolment in ARP, the Territorial Army, and other home defence services.⁶⁰ The Under Secretary of State responsible for the Home Office, Sir John Anderson, was especially concerned about educating the public about Air Raid Precautions. Despite the failure of *The Gap*, those in the Home Office were convinced that film remained a powerful tool. What better way to spread their message to the twenty million Britons who visited the cinema every week? One film that inspired this belief was *The World in Revolt*, released shortly after *The Gap* in 1937. The film, a

⁵⁹ “The Co-ordination of Defence” (London: British Movietone, September 2, 1939).

⁶⁰ Post Office Archive, POST 33/4598, ARP Film. The 1939 ARP Budget contained £65,000 in funding for recruitment publicity, the lion’s share of which went to newspaper advertising and publicity regarding gas masks (£20,000 each), the rest was allocated to films production, distribution, and exhibition (£12,000), along with posters and leaflets.

history of the world since the end of the Great War, highlights how Great Britain successfully navigated the economic and political crises of the 1920s and 1930s while other countries descended into chaos and totalitarianism.⁶¹ Nevertheless, the picture depicts the dangers facing Britain in the 1930s. Through dramatic enactments, the film explores British responses to gas attacks unleashed by enemy bombers. It pays much less attention to the attacking airplanes; they are mere sounds in the background that incite fear. The focus on gas is so extensive that the film actually tours the National Gas Mask Factory in Blackburn, looks at the various types of masks available, and describes the numerous levels of civil defence that are devoted to gas protection (decontamination squads, St. John Ambulance, and Air Raid Wardens). *World in Revolt* received positive reviews by the British press and was, according to the Associated British Picture Corporation, booked by hundreds of cinemas throughout the United Kingdom. To those at Associated British and the Home Office it was a “very encouraging indication of the success which special propaganda work should meet with in the future.”⁶²

Shortly before *The Gap*'s release, the French government released its own fifty-minute air defence film: *Alerte*. The film treats its subject in much the same way as both *The Gap* and *The Warning*, portraying the various means being deployed to protect the French population in the event on an air raid: gas masks, air raid shelters, evacuation procedures, and home defences. The film influenced British National Pictures, especially writer-producer John Corfield and his staff. They felt that despite the commercial failure of *The Gap* there was room for British National to make a picture, or series of pictures,

⁶¹ Like *The Gap* and *The Warning*, *World in Revolt* (London: British Pathé, 1937) was made with the cooperation of the British government. See also Low, *Films of Comment and Persuasion of the 1930s*.

⁶² TNA HO 45/17602, Civil Defence: ARP Instruction for the Public: Films, Letter from Associated British Picture Corporation to Wing Commander Hodsoll, ARP Department, Home Office, November 22, 1937.

that emulated *Alerte*. After seeing *Alerte* Corfield quickly wrote a draft script depicting British air defences and sent it to the Home Office. He hoped to acquire the full cooperation of the departments involved (ARP, the Royal Navy, the Territorial Army, ambulances, fire services, the RAF, and gas decontamination) and work their efforts into a documentary film that would show to the British people the measures their government was taking to protect them from aerial attack. Corfield's approach to the film was grounded in his firm belief that future wars would largely be fought in the air with airplanes that by 1937 had become far more destructive than they were in 1918. It should be noted that Corfield was a film producer with no military expertise. This picture, in his mind, would be filled with action, contain a story, and be fast moving; otherwise it would fail to capture viewers' attention. Those at the Home Office who saw the film script agreed with Corfield's assertion that such a film could be successful in Great Britain.⁶³ For all intents and purposes, Corfield was laying down the essential elements what would become *The Warning* in his letter to ARP, drawing heavily on the work of French filmmakers. He found an eager response in the Home Office when he pitched the film. This enthusiasm undoubtedly facilitated the production of film, as the Home Office was able to secure the full cooperation of the required government agencies: the Home Office, ARP, the Air Ministry, the RAF, the War Office, and the Admiralty.⁶⁴

⁶³ TNA HO 45/17602, Civil Defence: ARP Instruction for the Public: Films, Letter from Corfield, British National Pictures to Under Secretary of State, Home Office, February 5, 1937 and Notes on Corfield Proposal, Major F. C. Caillard, ARP Department, Home Office, May 24, 1937.

⁶⁴ TNA HO 45/17602, Civil Defence: ARP Instruction for the Public: Films, Letter from Corfield, British National to Caillard, Home Office, ARP, June 12, 1937. As a matter of fact, that assistance caused a row between British National and the Home Office, when in summer 1937, news broke that the American studio MGM had secured the official assistance of the Air Ministry in the production of a film entitled *The Shadow of the Wing*, starring Clark Gable. The conclusion of *The Shadow of the Wing* was to have taken place high above Britain in a climatic aerial battle (presumably with Gable flying a fighter) that would showcase the RAF and Britain's air defences. In the end, however, the film was never made, much to the delight of Corfield and those at British National.

Initially, Corfield and British National Pictures were certain that their proposed air raid picture would be a commercial success. However, even as *The Warning* was in pre-production, it was becoming clear that the film might not prove to be so. As noted earlier, *The Gap* lost money, making Bruce Wolfe and Gaumont British (the company what made *The Gap*) cool to any future air raid projects, despite the extensive publicity that would be possible in a government-sponsored project, or the “public spirit” the company could be seen as promoting.⁶⁵ This reluctance was not lost on British National, and even when the film was in its draft stage they were moving to renege on their initial promise to bear the cost of film and seeking protection from the Home Office and His Majesty’s Treasury for potential losses in the production of the film.⁶⁶ However the Home Office never offered Corfield and British National a guarantee of profitability, and the company continued to move forward with the production of the film.

British National intended to strike a delicate balance between scaring viewers into service and assuring them that the government was doing everything it could to protect them from aerial destruction. They hoped to seize on, and exploit, numerous sources of anxiety in British culture during the interwar period. Initially, Corfield and his writing team sought to tap into the general anxiety that persisted in Great Britain during the late 1930s, specifically regarding rearmament. Even more acute was the British fear of aerial attack; as noted earlier, the RAF was actually the focus of British rearmament efforts, especially later in the 1930s. This fear of aerial attack was given credence by the devastation of the Spanish Civil War and the Japanese bombing of Chinese cities. In

⁶⁵ TNA HO 45/17602, Civil Defence: ARP Instruction for the Public: Films, Letter from HM Stationary Office to F.C. Caillard, Home Office, ARP Department, July 13, 1937.

⁶⁶ TNA HO 45/17602, Civil Defence: ARP Instruction for the Public: Films, Letter from Hodsoll to Corfield, June 29, 1937. The Treasury felt that the film should not be protected from loss because it was “one of general public interest.”

fact, it was hoped that the film could make direct reference to the attacks on Basque and Chinese civilians. In the more abstract, as explored in chapter two, many Britons were convinced that an aerial assault on the United Kingdom would lead to massive social dislocation, discontent, and even revolution. The filmmakers wanted to be sure that they conveyed this message to the viewers; without their assistance Britain would buckle under the strain of attack, destroying the world as they knew it.

A number of letters between John Corfield and the Home Office signal British National's intent to stress the "atmosphere of horror" that would ensue should Britain be subjected to aerial bombardment. The staff at British National, along with the public relations staff at ARP, wanted to ensure that this "atmosphere of horror" would not be limited to London in the event of an attack. Wing Commander Hodsoll, Chief of ARP, was hesitant about the film focusing too much on the defence of London. Instead, he suggested that the film focus on a city or town in the Midlands, the North, or even Scotland. Hodsoll felt that making the film too squarely focused on London would discourage recruitment in Britain's other major urban centres, weakening potential defences. Ultimately, Nottingham, in the East Midlands, was selected as the focus for the film. It was far north enough to convey the message that all Britain could be subject to bombardment in an attack, and large enough to show people of cities like Manchester, Liverpool, Leicester, and Coventry that they too could potentially be victims of an attack; indeed, all Britons had something to fear from the bomber, as residents of Coventry would soon learn in November 1940.

Early drafts of the film were remarkably ambitious. One was intended to be a multiple-hour fourteen-episode serial that could be shown before feature films. Each

episode would have a famous presenter: Princess Elizabeth (the future Elizabeth II) was to give a presentation on how parents could protect their children; Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin would give a talk on anti-gas instruction: the Archbishop of Canterbury would consider whether establishing air defences was compatible with religious teaching; while movie star Gracie Fields would discuss women's roles in defence.⁶⁷ Other original versions proposed a character-driven drama, describing Britain's air defences and encouraging volunteers while telling a story entertaining enough to capture the viewers' interest. Their original plan was to use a group of characters that represent a "cross section of a London community:" a banker, a young married couple, a professional man, and a doctor. The idea was to show how each of these people, regardless of social standing or situation, had much to fear from an aerial attack, whether it was from an international group of nihilists or English rebels (likely evoking some reference to the British Union of Fascists).⁶⁸ As in the final cut, the filmmakers were deliberately planning to have people in the film behave calmly to maintain social order and keep the air defences functioning.

In one draft of the film, a journalist intensely questions the necessity of preparations the government is making for an attack, only to be convinced by his father, a First World War veteran that "it is being wisely spent and must not be grudged. If we value our home, if we care about our work, if our children's happiness means anything to us, then it is our duty to cooperate with the authorities in everyway to make the future

⁶⁷ TNA HO 45/17602, Civil Defence: ARP Instruction for the Public: Films, Outline of the Multiple Episode Version of Film. Other proposed titles included: Britain Prepares, Be Prepared, For Hearth and Home, Take Time by the Forelock, Precautionary Measures, Why and What, Britain's Public Defence, For one and All.

⁶⁸ TNA HO 45/17602, Civil Defence: ARP Instruction for the Public: Films, Letter from Corfield, British National Pictures to Major F.C. Caillard, ARP Department, Home Office, May 22, 1937.

secure for them.”⁶⁹ These words never appeared in the final version. However, they speak to the themes that the writers, and those at the Home Office, had very much in mind: social control and maintenance of British social cohesion through the participation of the citizenry. The theme of repressing the subversive elements in society (whether they be nihilists, fascists, or leftists) and rallying people around British values recurs throughout the proposed versions of the film, the film itself, and ultimately some reactions to screenings. Also evident throughout these production documents (and throughout the film itself) is the notion that these defences are being established as much for Britain’s survival as its defence. Those in the ARP Department at the Home Office did not appear to have any moral trepidation about using fear to encourage recruitment. Quite the opposite in fact, Major F. C. Caillard, felt that fear as the background was “ingeniously presented.”⁷⁰

By the end of 1938, the earliest cuts of the film were complete and it was shown to government officials on January 23, 1939. Those in attendance included Sir John Anderson, the Right Honourable Leslie Hore-Belisha, Secretary of State for War, and representatives from each of the services. Most of the criticism of the preliminary version of the film connected directly to aviation. Most felt that the British planes shown in the film were obsolete and that more Spitfires and Hurricanes needed to be depicted. Additionally, too many enemy airplanes were shown cutting through Britain’s defences and not enough were shown being shot down. The Royal Navy, of course, objected to its

⁶⁹ TNA HO 45/17602, Civil Defence: ARP Instruction for the Public: Films, Proposed outline of the Film (untitled), Dora Nuva, Production Manager, British National Pictures, March 22, 1937.

⁷⁰ TNA HO 45/17602, Civil Defence: ARP Instruction for the Public: Films, Notes on Corfield Proposal, Major F.C. Caillard, Home Office, ARP Department, May 24, 1937.

limited role in the picture. Most of these objections were addressed in the final version of film.

Sensational, but Stoppable: *The Warning*

As in *The Gap*, there is a clear effort by British National to portray life in Great Britain as harmonious and pleasant. Playful music is played over various scenes of people bustling about, conducting their daily business or relaxing in a sunny and busy British city; according to this sequence, life in Britain is good.⁷¹ Yet, these idyllic scenes of Britain are quickly juxtaposed with a political crisis fictionalized on the screen. The music turns menacing as a series of news headlines from the *Evening Standard* indicate that an international crisis requiring emergency meetings of Cabinet, mobilization and the recall of reserve forces, has been thrust upon the British government. As in *The Gap*, a fictional radio broadcast is used to inform the British people that while the military may be mobilizing, their government is pursuing all possible options to prevent a war.⁷²

Civilian organizations are shown as well prepared. The police are shown preparing for an attack. This seems to speak more to the establishment's fears of social dislocation, population panic, and chaos in the aftermath of bombing than their role during an aerial assault. Nevertheless, as this film was intended to attract citizens to the ARP and other related departments, considerable emphasis is placed on preparations.

⁷¹ The film takes place in Nottingham, but the cityscape appears to be a much larger urban area, likely London.

⁷² The film takes close to two minutes going through the preparations each of the services are making. The preparations are indicated on a map of Great Britain, which shows the location of Royal Navy bases, anti-aircraft batteries and RAF bases. The Royal Navy ships are shown at sea patrolling the skies with deck mounted anti-aircraft artillery. The ships are shown moving at high speed and making sweeping banked turns, surely to convey a sense of their speed and capability. The anti-aircraft battery sequence shows ARP men using a variety of different equipment, from listening devices and binoculars to manning AA guns placed in a field.

Evidently the film is trying to draw volunteers to civil defence as air raid wardens, observers, decontamination squad members, fire fighters, and first-aid attendees.⁷³ A few very clear common themes are evident in how the film depicts these seemingly ordinary Britons: they are dutiful; they wear their uniforms with pride; and they carry out their duties with noticeable enthusiasm. Second, technology is conspicuously placed amongst them. ARP wardens carry gas masks, and observers are shown using listening devices and fire fighters using pumps. This is even clearer in the film's depiction of the ARP decontamination squads. The film explores the step-by-step process involved in suiting-up for decontamination work, with men shown helping each other put on black rubber suits, gas masks and rubber boots.⁷⁴ Additionally, the film explains how air raid wardens will warn people of an impending attack using sirens, noisemakers, horns, and hooters.⁷⁵ Even if citizens choose not to join the air defences, the film reminds them there is much they can do to protect themselves in the event of a raid. People are instructed and shown how to board-up or blackout their windows, dig a ditch in their back gardens, or install an Anderson shelter.

The marauding airplanes (presumably German) immediately live up to their characterization. The narrator warns viewers that "enemy bombers travel at hundreds of miles per hours; every town is a target; any town is a target; this is Nottingham." These words are voiced over images of seemingly limitless airplanes flying in formation and

⁷³ *The Warning*, 2-5 minutes.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 4-6 Minutes.

⁷⁵ The producers of *The Warning* had learned their lesson from the minor diplomatic squabble created by *The Gap*. They tried to make sure that it did not appear to be a particular state attacking Great Britain. However, given the period of the film's production, and especially its release (Spring 1939) it would be difficult, if not impossible to avoid viewers associating the potential enemy with Germany.

views of serene British towns.⁷⁶ Of course, the film's score now takes on a menacing and foreboding tone. The narrator warns that wave upon wave of enemy bombers will strike cities throughout Britain without rest in the first hours of the war.⁷⁷ Not surprisingly, the bombers depicted in the film are not remotely capable of bringing the destruction that the film suggests; they are two-engine bombers, which bear a commendable resemblance to a German He 111.⁷⁸ Whatever the case, the enemy bombers, though menacing, play a minimal role in the film, limiting depictions mostly to exploding cities and enemy aviators.⁷⁹ When they are shown inside their aircraft, their faces are obscured by masks, as they man machine-guns or aim bombs. The image of the bombardier looks very much like the painting *In tuffo sulla citta (Nose Dive on the City)*, 1939, by Tullio Crali. The only time enemy aviators have any human qualities is after the raid on Nottingham. Three downed enemy pilots are shown, one is lying dead next to his airplane and the others are fleeing from theirs as it burns on the ground.⁸⁰ Originally enemy aviators and bombers were meant to play a larger role in the film. However, after the first screening the GPO Film unit (who was responsible for the aerial photography) felt there was too

⁷⁶ *The Warning*, 8 minutes. A later part of the film indicates that the bombers fly at "18,000 [feet]" *The Warning*, 20 minutes. While this would have been fairly standard for bombers of the period, such a height would have likely amazed the average British cinema patron.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 25 Minutes.

⁷⁸ The He 111 was a German medium bomber during the Second World War. It was the primary bomber for the Luftwaffe during the Battle of Britain (Summer and Fall 1940). While it was a capable medium and tactical bomber, it was unsuited for a strategic bombing role. It held an inadequate payload, had poor defensive armament, and was somewhat slow. As a result, it made for easy prey for Fighter Command and inflicted minimal, albeit dramatic, damage to London, Coventry, and other cities that were blitzed. For more on the Battle of Britain see Holland, *The Battle of Britain*, Overy, *The Battle of Britain*, Richard Bickers, *The Battle of Britain: The Greatest Air Battle in the History of Air Warfare* (London: Salamander Books, 1999), Tim Clayton, *Finest Hour: The Battle of Britain* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999).

⁷⁹ Though there is no real way of confirming, most of these images appear to have been taken from newsreel footage of bombing during the Spanish Civil War, likely the attacks on Madrid in November 1936.

⁸⁰ *The Warning*, 26 minutes.

much footage of enemy bombers to allow people in the audience to use their imaginations about being attacked. Apparently this reduced the amount of suspense, and with it fear.⁸¹

The RAF plays a relatively minor role in this film, compared to the actual role they were assigned by the Air Ministry and Fighter Command in the years leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War and the absolutely vital role they would play in the Battle of Britain. Still, as in *The Gap*, the RAF is depicted favourably, even heroically. Its first appearance in the film is nearly identical to *The Gap*. A commanding officer, with new orders, enters a briefing room to find keen, young flying officers wearing full flight-gear (leather coats with fur collars, helmets with goggles, and oxygen masks); they are also sporting thin moustaches and scarves.⁸² As they scramble from their briefing room and into their Spitfires the film's narrator declares, "the Royal Air Force takes up the challenge!"⁸³ This is merely the beginning of the film's promotion of the RAF. The planes are meant to emphasize speed and strength. As they race down the runway the narrator declares "British planes go up!" The next shot shows them whizzing past their hangars, emphasising the technological sophistication of the RAF: "new fighting machines are incredibly fast...they are on their way to meet the enemy bombers."⁸⁴ The fighters do not reappear in the film until later, when they are engaging bombers after the attack on Nottingham.⁸⁵ The cuts are made very quickly to convey a

⁸¹ TNA HO 45/17602, Civil Defence: ARP Instruction for the Public: Films, Letter from Highet, Public Relations Department, GPO Film Unit to Crutchley, Public Relations Officer, ARP, December 2, 1938.

⁸² *The Warning*, 11 Minutes.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 11 Minutes.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 12 Minutes.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 17 Minutes. There are also some glaring technical errors. The types of aircraft change frequently from monoplane to biplane, also there are moments when the filmmakers attempt to pass off aerial shots of fighter aircraft as bombers. Initially, the RAF was very disappointed with how they were portrayed in the film. They asked that these aerial sequences be reshot to reflect the more modern aesthetic of the new RAF. However, their concerns were not worked into the final version. TNA Air 2/4038, Press and

sense of urgency and intensity to the fighting. While the faces of the raiders remain obscured, RAF pilots' faces are shown, clearly an attempt to dehumanize the enemy attackers, while glorifying the RAF. This scene sends a paradoxical message to the viewer: the fighters are advanced and capable of destroying enemy bombers, yet they are unable to engage them before they strike. Indeed, it would appear the filmmakers have chosen to focus on imagery more likely to encourage enlistment – the destruction of a city – than promoting the capabilities of the RAF. After all, the film is a promotional piece for ARP and home defences – not the RAF.

More important to the film, however, is the response of British defence services, from ARP wardens to anti-aircraft artillery units. All elements of British civil defence are depicted as reacting quickly, professionally, and efficiently to the attack. As soon as the attack begins, the police quickly shuffle people off the streets and ARP personnel report to their posts as quickly as possible. Each scene reinforces the calm efficiency of both the police and ARP. Further, the citizens of Nottingham accept the instructions of the police and ARP with calm obedience. The next shot shows the nearly empty streets of Nottingham, save a few hurrying citizens and a truck, complete with loud speakers declaring: “you still have eighteen minutes to find cover, remain until the all clear is sounded; this is most important; take shelter now.”⁸⁶ Even more emphatic, and directed straight at the audience in the cinema, are the words of the narrator:

No time now for asking what to do or where to go. No time now for further training and organization. The hour of our trial is upon us.⁸⁷

Publicity Branch Reorganisation, April 1939, “Publicity Committee, Progress Report no. 27, period ending 31st March, 1939.”

⁸⁶ Ibid., 10 minutes.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 11 minutes.

As the narrator challenges the audience with these foreboding words, the film delivers what is perhaps its most powerful montage of people hurrying to defend the country: women and children running into Anderson Shelters, fire-trucks racing down the street, air-raid wardens running up and down the street ringing their bells. At this stage the message of the film could not be clearer: not only does everyone in Britain have a role to play in the event of an attack, but also they need to be ready well in advance.

While the cities are preparing to be bombed, the anti-aircraft batteries and listening posts are shown as being manned with similar haste. The AA batteries are shown to be efficient and coordinated enough to shoot down an enemy bomber. As in *The Gap*, the filmmakers also take this opportunity to showcase the command and coordination system.⁸⁸

Despite the best efforts of the city's defenders, many enemy bombers manage to penetrate the defences and unleash considerable destruction on Nottingham. Of course, the film places the clearest emphasis the material destruction of homes and businesses, using stock footage of bombs falling on cityscapes and people running for shelter. British National selected surprising graphic imagery and language (relative to the period) to portray the destruction that should be expected in an aerial attack. At one moment, the control room is struggling to get through to an ARP warden's office in another part of the city. The muffled voice of the controller saying "I'm still trying to get through. I can get no reply," while the camera focuses on a bloodied and dusty hand resting lifeless on rubble.⁸⁹ Additionally, the narrator and the control room telephone operators repeatedly mention the number of casualties suffered in each bomber attack: "air raid damage, nine

⁸⁸ Ibid., 12-25 minutes.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 17-18 minutes.

casualties, none trapped,” “bomb Latimer street, two houses wrecked,” “air raid damage, twenty casualties,” or “air raid damage, heavy casualties.”⁹⁰ As the film nears its conclusion, the imagery of explosions becomes much more graphic, using quick edits from character to explosion to directly imply death.⁹¹ The film ensures that viewers understood that even if they or their loved ones were not killed or injured by the “high explosive bombs,” their lives would be seriously disrupted or totally changed. To make this point, the film emphasizes the damage that will be caused to infrastructure in Nottingham. Specifically, it notes the destruction of bridges, rail-lines, sewers, water pipes, gas lines, and roads blocked by destroyed buildings.⁹² Perhaps even more important, roads from fire stations and police stations will also be obstructed, forcing people to fend for themselves.

However, the most terrifying imagery is reserved for gas attacks. The film easily transfers from explosive attacks to gas attack. Suddenly the narrator yells “mustard gas! Tell those in the street to take gas precautions!”⁹³ The ARP personnel in the film react with much more urgency and even panic as they don their masks and warn civilians. Civilians are then shown also panicking as gas spreads around them. Other strong imagery is also used to depict the gas attacks: rats flee from the gas, while one victim of the attack is shown pinned under a burnt piece of wood, a bloody hand clutching an unused gas mask.⁹⁴ Indeed, British National Pictures was trying to ensure that audiences fully realized the danger posed by chemical weapons. If the explosive bombs and the gas attack were not enough to frighten viewers, the film then turns to an incendiary raid to

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 22 minutes.

⁹² Ibid., 13-15 minutes.

⁹³ Ibid., 17 minutes.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 19 minutes.

remove any doubt in the viewer's mind about the harsh reality they face should an attack come. The incendiary attack sets numerous buildings ablaze, all of which are reported by the control room. The controllers note, "fire out of control on Parliament street" and "big fire at no. 12 Hilton Street." In fact, the final shot of the fictional Nottingham is of large sections of the city ablaze as the music turns more menacing.

The Warning clearly shows that British cities will be forced to endure a massive, perhaps even an unbearable, amount of destruction if attacked by enemy bombers. However, what is made equally clear by the film is the tenacity with which British volunteers respond to the crisis and the Home Office's hope that others will volunteer and show equal dedication. As alluded to earlier, at each step the Territorial Army, ARP, and other emergency services respond to the destruction and are shown overcoming it. Indeed, that is the film's second and equally important message: no matter what the enemy throws at Britain, it must and will endure. The film is filled with images of British volunteers working hard to cope with the destruction. The control room orders roads to be cleared and police to control crowds, and hurries ambulances to injured victims. The Air Raid Wardens are frequently shown calmly going about their duties as buildings crumble or burn around them. Decontamination squads, dressed in rubber suits and equipped with hoses, brooms, and powders, start cleaning Nottingham's streets even before the bombs stop falling. They are also shown helping people to public hospitals and decontamination centres, while the narrator explains describes the procedure and the importance of decontamination.⁹⁵ Perhaps the most valiant effort depicted in the film is reserved for the fire fighters. As the control room commander, and in some cases the narrator, comments on the fires breaking out all over Nottingham the city's fire fighters

⁹⁵ Ibid., 19-21 minutes.

are shown responding to the blazes using trucks, pumps, and fire-hoses. Ultimately the combined efforts of Nottingham's volunteers are triumphant: the enemy bombers retreat towards the North Sea as the all-clear is sounded (and explained by the narrator); on the streets, the fire fighters have extinguished the flames; the ARP wardens are shuffling people out of their refuges and pulling citizens (usually women, children, and the elderly) from rubble; ambulances carry the wounded to hospitals; and workers clear the streets of debris. Finally the commander in the control room calmly informs someone on the other end of his telephone: "wardens report all sectors of central division under control, sir."⁹⁶ The overriding theme in the depiction of the volunteers is their cooperation and obedience to the structures of command while making meaningful contributions to their country.⁹⁷ Reinforcing this, the film concludes with a speech from Sir John Anderson:

The picture you have just seen has given you an idea of the horrors of modern warfare. It has also shown you in action the great services that have been created in your defence: the Royal Navy, the army, the Royal Air Force, the police, and the various services that are under the familiar name of Air Raid Precautions.

War today involves not only the fighting services, as it did in the past, but the whole population, and the people must be organized for their own defence. This means service, service for security, and the better we are prepared to meet a hostile attack the less likely it is that an attack will be made. We must be prepared and it is the duty of every one of us to consider what part he or she can best play. You have all now seen the guide to national service, which the government has distributed to every home in the country. I invite you to study it and if you are not satisfied that you are already doing everything that your country might reasonably expect of you, to make up your mind where your duty lies and act. We want to see the ranks filled and then behind them reserves, ready to step into vacancies. Your country calls upon you for your

⁹⁶ Ibid., 27 minutes.

⁹⁷ The writers at British National actually lamented the need to show people working together within the confines of the air defence system. They felt that personal stories and cases of individual agency or heroics would have made for a more entertaining picture. They note that had this been an American film there certainly would have been cases of individual heroics, even disobedient heroics. TNA HO 45/17602, Civil Defence: ARP Instruction for the Public: Films, Preliminary Draft of the Film Entitled "Zero Hour," May 29, 1937. One of the critical points that British National and the Home Office wanted to advance was this notion of civic responsibility and duty.

own protection and the protection of your families and your friends. It is a call which I am confident will have a heartening response.⁹⁸

The speech effectively summarizes the entire message of the film. The airplane is a weapon that is to be feared. Unlike *The Gap*, *The Warning* ends on a positive note – the bomber is something that with the right investment of time, resources, and personnel can be defended against. This coincides with the changes to British air strategy during the late 1930s from an exclusively offensive force to a largely defensive one.

Going to the Cinema, Volunteering for Service: The Reaction to *The Warning*

The Warning premiered at the Regal Cinema in London on March 15, 1939, only a week after Nazi Germany completed its annexation of Czechoslovakia.⁹⁹ The film was primarily shown to the British public during April and May 1939, by the three largest cinema circuits in the United Kingdom: Associated British, Gaumont British, and Odeon.¹⁰⁰ Before it formally left cinemas, *The Warning* was seen on over 2,000 screens in the United Kingdom.¹⁰¹ There was even a special showing for Members of Parliament at the Palace of Westminster on May 3, 1939.¹⁰² The importance of the timing of the film's release, right around when belief of possibility of future war with Germany was reaching a crescendo, cannot be overstated. The *News Chronicle* called it the "most

⁹⁸ Sir John Anderson in *The Warning*, 28 Minutes. According to the assessment of the reaction to the film by an ARP officer at Walthamstow, Sir John Anderson was cheered after his remarks. TNA HO 186/318, PUBLICATIONS AND PUBLICITY, Use of film "The Warning" for education of public in air warfare and for recruitment purposes, Letter from the Borough of Walthamstow to Crutchley, Public Relations Officer, May 1939. It was originally hoped that Stanley Baldwin would deliver the speech at the end of the film.

⁹⁹ *Times*, March 16, 1939, 14. The film was released after a trailer campaign; Odeon pictures, for example, agreed to show trailers for the film at no charge to the government.

¹⁰⁰ Letter from Odeon Theatres to Deputy Under Secretary of State, Home Office ARP Department, March, 3, 1938. Each of the cinema companies had promised to distribute the film in 1938.

¹⁰¹ *Kinematograph Weekly*, November 23, 1939, 26.

¹⁰² TNA INF 5/59, ARP (*The Warning*) production of the film. Letter from Associated British Picture Corporation Ltd. to S. J. Fletcher, Esq., G.P.O. Film Unit, May 3, 1939.

exciting of this week's films."¹⁰³ Yet, the British press recognized the unabashed propaganda film for what it was. The *Times* called the film in their review a clear "call to service by Sir John Anderson." Despite this recognition of the film's clear propagandistic intent, British film reviewers endorsed the film and its message. For example, in its extensive review of the film, the *Birmingham Post* argued that every cinema in Great Britain should show the film because the cinema actually does a better job of conveying messages about air defence than any other media used by the government, notably pamphlets.¹⁰⁴ It contended that the film was of vital importance because it showed the British people that there was actually a system in place to prevent the chaos that had been predicted if the country were to come under aerial attack. Similarly, the *Daily Sketch* told its readers that the film was that timely, given deteriorating relations in Europe.

As in *The Gap*, the destructive imagery contained in *The Warning* rattled British commentators who called it a clear depiction of "the horrors of modern war."¹⁰⁵ Indeed, the filmmakers seemed to have achieved the desired results; the film was seen as both frightening and realistic. Words such as discomfiting, striking, vivid, disturbing, cold, and realism fill reviews of the film.¹⁰⁶ The *Times*, like other British newspapers, felt it depicted "the more frightful disasters of war" with "considerable ingenuity." The *Times* also astutely noted that the film was more than merely a fictionalization of what would happen in the event of an attack against Great Britain. Instead, the *Times* saw *The*

¹⁰³ *News Chronicle*, March 22, 1939.

¹⁰⁴ *Birmingham Post*, April 27, 1939.

¹⁰⁵ *Daily Sketch*, March 24, 1939.

¹⁰⁶ *Evening News*, March 24, 1939, *Evening Standard*, March 23, 1939, *News Chronicle*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, all March 22, 1939. The reviews in the *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Sketch*, and the *Daily Herald* also reflect these opinions about the film's harsh realism.

Warning as actually a “complete dress rehearsal” for what the next war will look like: how the crisis will begin, how a diplomatic solution will be sought, and what the response of the British government will be. The *Birmingham Post* and the *Daily Herald* echoed the *Times*’ sentiments; both felt the film was a welcome and needed change from the fictional depictions of aerial warfare that had been shown in British cinemas. As was the case with the release of *The Gap*, the film’s perceived realism was granted a high level of authenticity by reviews on the basis of the roles that the British armed forces played in its production. ARP was very concerned with the reactions of the British press, collecting, underlining, and commenting on the reactions of tabloids and broadsheets to the film.

The public at large, at least in part, seems to have appreciated the message of the film. For example, Mrs. Beadle, the wife of wealthy industrialist Fred Beadle, wrote directly to Sir John Anderson to express her thoughts on the film. Despite what feels like condescension in referring to her ability to understand the working class, she does offer some valuable insights. She viewed to the film with what she described as a working-class audience. She describes the film as a terrifying way to remind those who do not remember the last war (the First World War) just how awful it can be and that it “effectively demonstrates the unrealized horror of bombing, so much so, Mrs. Beadle claims, “several people fainted or went out as it was really terrifying.” This led Mrs. Beadle to claim that the film should have been toned down slightly and contain a little more practical instruction, rather than scaring people. These scare tactics, she contends (she is not merely citing her own response, but also what she perceived to be the mood in the cinema when she saw the film), made the audience feel “a realization of futility of

any individual against the machines, a general depression, and [an] avoid war at all cost attitude.”¹⁰⁷ Despite her criticism, she concludes the letter with positive words for Sir John Anderson and the work being carried out, claiming that had this film been available in every cinema in the country during the Munich crisis, it would have done a great deal to calm the nerves of the British people. She felt this feeling of helplessness could have been alleviated by more attention to the proper construction of Anderson shelters. Sir John Anderson replied thanking her for the letter and informing her that it has been a success in terms of encouraging recruitment for the services depicted in the film.

In an even more extreme response, one especially gullible viewer from West Byfleet in Surrey mistook the film for a real crisis. After seeing the film he immediately cut short his seaside vacation in Brighton and returned to London, thinking that rail transportation would become more difficult as the war dragged on. He wrote to the manager of Brighton’s Savoy Theatre demanding an explanation for the film and was quickly informed by the manager that he was the only one of 10,000 people who had seen the film in the week since its opening at the Savoy to have taken it as an actual warning. However, the manager apologized for the confusion, and informed the viewer that the

¹⁰⁷ TNA HO 186/318, PUBLICATIONS AND PUBLICITY, Use of film “The Warning” for education of public in air warfare and for recruitment purposes. Letter from Mrs. Beadle to the Private Secretary to the Lord Privy Seal, Sir John Anderson, regarding “The Warning,” April 19, 1939. Some of the instructions she was hoping to see also included how people could conduct their own first aid, how they could prevent windows from breaking, how to care for gas masks, how to escape a fire, and how they can illuminate their homes. Internal memos written in response to Mrs. Beadle’s letter indicate a level of agreement with the concerns she raised. Those in Sir John Anderson’s office agreed that the film was probably too traumatic for showing to children and there probably should have been inclusion of instructions for everyday Britons. Nevertheless, they were satisfied with the primary message of the film, especially its ability to remind people of the horrors of war.

theatre was cooperating with the government to portray what might happen in the event of a war and calling attention to the services that might be taken up by civilians.¹⁰⁸

The film was primarily produced and released to the British public with the hope that it would startle Britons into taking the threat from the air more seriously (as if they did not already have a special fear of the bomber) and encourage more enlistment in the Territorial Army and ARP. The question remains then, was it successful in this regard? It appears the short answer to this question is yes. While it may be true that the size of both ARP and the Territorial Army was increasing in 1938 and 1939, it would be haphazard to draw a direct correlation between the showing of these films and that spike in enrolment. In fact both Titmuss and O'Brien point to the Munich Crisis as the key point for the shift in public attitude and the spike in ARP enrolment. However, a partial borough-by-borough analysis of the film's reception can be undertaken, using the fragmentary results of Sir John Anderson's requested review of the film's reception.¹⁰⁹ Seventeen different metropolitan London boroughs reported directly to the Home Office's public relations department on the results of the film. Most of the reports were filed by ARP officers who attend the film as part of their recruiting drive.

Members of the Home Office were concerned that the film would startle or even offend cinemagoers. At the same time, they had received complaints from ARP wardens about technical inaccuracies and mistakes even though audiences tended to agree with

¹⁰⁸ TNA HO 186/318, PUBLICATIONS AND PUBLICITY, Use of film "The Warning" for education of public in air warfare and for recruitment purposes. Letter from Mr. E. F. Donne, the Lodge, West Byfleet, Surrey, to manager, Savoy Cinema Brighton and letter from P. G. Lundy, Manager Savoy Theatre, Brighton to E. F. Donne.

¹⁰⁹ This is mentioned in note (94). Mayor offices were asked to report on how the film was received in their constituencies, specifically what the "general effect" of the film was. TNA HO 45/17602, Civil Defence: ARP Instruction for the Public: Films, Letters from the Home Office, Public Relations Officer Crutchley to various London boroughs and councils. April 27, 1939.

newspaper reviews about the film's realism.¹¹⁰ One ARP officer actually celebrated the realism in the film, despite the fact that two women fainted in the cinema that he viewed it in. Women fainting during the film were not uncommon occurrences. A woman also "fainted with terror" during the showing of film at Lancaster Road Royal Cinema in Kensington and a number of women became "hysterical" in the theatre in the Borough of Camberwell.¹¹¹ Many ARP officers reported back to the Home Office that the film would push people into acknowledging the reality of the worsening international situation.¹¹² Many people saw the film as a "faithful record" of what might occur in the event of an air raid, encouraging them to volunteer.¹¹³

This positive reception of the film's realism and its messages, based on a sampling from the National Archives' files, indicates that the film's popularity transcended class boundaries. The Borough of Leyton, in East London, is especially telling in this regard. The ARP Officer supervising the showing of the film, Corbet Burchey, notes that it was shown at three different cinemas (the Rex, the Leytonstone, and the Ritz) each generally attended by a different class. The film had a positive reception at both the Rex and Leytonstone. However, according to Burchey, the response at the middle-class Leytonstone was slightly more positive than the working-class Rex, at

¹¹⁰ ARP wardens from a variety of boroughs pointed out problems they found with the film. For example, some complained about men using the telephone while not wearing their gas masks or what they perceived to be mistakes about the general themes of the picture.

¹¹¹ Letter from Borough of Leyton, ARP Officer Corbet Burchey to Crutchley, Public Relations Officer, Home Office, April 28, 1939. Letter from the Borough of Camberwell, ARP Officer Thomas Domaille to Crutchley, Public Relations Officer, Home Office, May 2, 1939.

¹¹² TNA 45/17602, Civil Defence: ARP Instruction for the Public: Films, Letter from Metropolitan Borough of Hackney to Crutchley, Public Relations Officer, Home Office, April 28, 1939.

¹¹³ TNA 45/17602, Civil Defence: ARP Instruction for the Public: Films, Letter from Major A.J. Lewer, ARP Officer, Borough of Southall, Middlesex to Crutchley, Public Relations Officer, Home Office, April 28, 1939.

which there was some “rowdyism.”¹¹⁴ The film coincided with a spike in enrolment, leading Burchey to the conclusion that the film had a positive impact on recruitment amongst the middle and lower classes.¹¹⁵ This seemingly universal public appeal also encouraged positive responses from cinema owners, as indicated by reports from ARP officers in Kensington, Kingston-upon-Thames, and Stoke Newington.¹¹⁶

Nevertheless, ARP officers did cite some objections to the film. As noted earlier, many officers reported hysterical reactions from some cinemagoers. In the same vein, many ARP officers recommended that children not attend on account of the graphic images. This was, according to some objecting ARP officers, the result of the film focusing too much on sensationalising the experience of being bombed, rather than paying attention to what the government and military were doing to protect its citizens and how volunteers were trained to be effective guards of the state. One ARP officer complained that British citizens had been inundated with images and talk of the horrors of war and the film would worsen their apprehensions.¹¹⁷ In his mind, future films should focus more on defensive measures than anything else. The officer from Southall noted there was some aversion to the film, though not as bad as anticipated considering

¹¹⁴ Rowdysim was commonplace and something British cinema managers had to deal with since the advent of the cinema. It was particularly acute in cinemas during the First World War, when cinema owners often had to take active measures to control their audience and what was thought of as proper cinema etiquette had not yet been established. Nicholas Hey, “The British Cinema Auditorium,” in *Film and the First World War*, eds. Dibbets and Hogenkamp, 160.

¹¹⁵ TNA HO 186/318, PUBLICATIONS AND PUBLICITY, Use of film “The Warning” for education of public in air warfare and for recruitment purposes. Letter from Borough of Leyton, ARP Officer Corbet Burchey to Crutchley, Public Relations Officer, Home Office, April 28, 1939.

¹¹⁶ TNA HO 186/318, PUBLICATIONS AND PUBLICITY, Use of film “The Warning” for education of public in air warfare and for recruitment purposes. Letter from Borough of Stoke-Newington to Crutchley, Public Relations Officer, Home Office, April 28, 1939.

¹¹⁷ TNA HO 186/318, PUBLICATIONS AND PUBLICITY, Use of film “The Warning” for education of public in air warfare and for recruitment purposes. Letter from Town Clerk David Jenkins, Metropolitan Borough of Woolwich to Crutchley, Public Relations Officer, Home Office, May 15, 1939.

they had a “few of the peculiar people” living in their borough (from the tone of the letter it appears he was referring to pacifists and leftists).

Given the considerable expense of producing the picture and the anxiety surrounding both recruitment and aerial warfare, it is regrettable that the Home Office did not establish a methodology for quantifying the recruitment impact of the film. However, based on the sampling of seventeen different London boroughs, it is apparent that the film had a positive impact on recruitment. In Enfield, North London, ARP officials reported a boom in recruitment after the showing of the film in three cinemas in the borough, though they were unclear of the actual numbers. In the days after the screening, 350 volunteers signed up for ARP in the Borough of St. Pancras. As part of a wider recruiting drive in Lambeth (which included newspaper advertisements and appearances by Air Wardens, AA gunners, rescue parties, ambulance volunteers along with fire services), the film was able to draw an additional 520 recruits into the ARP ranks.¹¹⁸ Perhaps the most encouraging report came from the ARP representative who attended the showing of the film in Stoke Newington, Hackney, North London, the site of bombing during the First World War. He was able to recruit 80 people into the service at the theatre at the end of the show, twenty-two of which were able to directly enter the borough’s ARP units. Over the course of the week, ARP was able to enlist an additional 240 recruits. In fact, the ARP unit in Stoke Newington was so encouraged by the results that it left a general feeling in the ARP office in that borough that the film, and cinema in

¹¹⁸ TNA HO 186/318, PUBLICATIONS AND PUBLICITY, Use of film “The Warning” for education of public in air warfare and for recruitment purposes. Letter from the Metropolitan Borough of St. Pancras to Crutchley, Public Relations Officer, Home Office, April 1939 and TNA HO 186/318, PUBLICATIONS AND PUBLICITY, Use of film "The Warning" for education of public in air warfare and for recruitment purposes. Letter from the Metropolitan Borough of Lambeth to Crutchley, Public Relations Officer, Home Office, May 8, 1939.

general, was an effective way to bring in volunteers.¹¹⁹ The film was reported to have a positive impact on recruitment in sixteen of the seventeen metropolitan boroughs that reported back in response to the Home Office's request for information, including Lambeth and Woolwich. In a number of boroughs, such as Wandsworth and Hammersmith, the film was shown at four cinemas in its opening week. Each showing had ARP officers present who reported that the film had a positive effect on recruitment. In fact, the ARP committee for Hammersmith requested the film's release be expanded in their borough.¹²⁰

The premiere of the film in the southeast London borough of Bexley is especially telling. The film premiered in Bexley on Saturday April 15, 1939, during what the *Kentish Times*, called an "inspiring stage spectacle."¹²¹ The large crowd was first treated to introductions of the local members of the services, ARP, Territorial Army, volunteers from St. John Ambulance, Air Wing Commander E. C. Dixon, the town clerk, and the Mayor; joining the volunteers and dignitaries on stage was a woman dressed as Britannia. After the introductions, the audience members were treated to a film that, according to the *Kentish Times*, "was realistic and compelling." ARP representatives at the film indicated in their report that the audience seemed to feel the film was a realistic depiction

¹¹⁹ TNA HO 186/318, PUBLICATIONS AND PUBLICITY, Use of film "The Warning" for education of public in air warfare and for recruitment purposes. Letter from the Metropolitan Borough of Stoke Newington, ARP Officer to Crutchley, Public Relations Officer, War Office, April 1939.

¹²⁰ TNA HO 186/318, PUBLICATIONS AND PUBLICITY, Use of film "The Warning" for education of public in air warfare and for recruitment purposes. Letter from Wandsworth Borough Council, ARP Committee to Crutchley, Public Relations Officer, Home Office, May 3, 1939 and TNA HO 186/318, PUBLICATIONS AND PUBLICITY, letter from Town Clerk, Hammersmith to Crutchley, Public Relations Officer, Home Office, May 3, 1939.

¹²¹ *Kentish Times*, April 21, 1939. This presentation of the film was repeated in Islington and presumably at other cinemas throughout Great Britain. At Islington, numerous services that were depicted in the film appeared on stage before the premiere: air raid wardens, stretcher parties, St. John Ambulance personnel, bicycle messengers, auxiliary fire service personnel, and decontamination squads. They were introduced by a lone speaker, illuminated by a spotlight. TNA HO 186/318 PUBLICATIONS AND PUBLICITY, Use of film "The Warning" for education of public in air warfare and for recruitment purposes. Stage Routine, showing of the film at Islington.

of an aerial attack. After the film, the mayor sang “Land of Hope and Glory” along with the crowd. Following his vocal rendition, the Mayor gave a speech that drew on the temper of the times and message of the film. He discussed the increasing unease caused by the growing threat of war, and argued that the English Channel was no longer the protection from attack that it once was. Specifically, air war and airplanes could bring heavy bomb loads to Britain. Britons could no longer rely on their armed forces to protect them; instead, he emphasized that they needed to take up their own defences and recognize that “the airplane has completely changed our outlook and we must reconcile ourselves to the fact that any war must inevitably bring us all into the actual battlefield.”¹²² Apparently with this in mind, he made specific references to the AA battalions in the film (who happened to be from Bexley) and how their contributions were helping to keep Britain safe. In Bexley’s case, the film acted as the focal point of a patriotic rally to arms. According to ARP reports on the premiere of the film, it was a resounding recruiting success in encouraging recruitment; over 600 men volunteered for ARP in the week after the showing of the film. The Bexley ARP officer concluded his report by stating the film was a “fine effort” and would continue to contribute to British recruitment efforts.¹²³ By the end of its run in British cinemas, it was clear to those at British National and the Home Office that the film was “a success from the point of view of obtaining ARP recruits and bringing home to the people the necessity of preparing for a passive defence against air raids.”¹²⁴ Even if recruits did not see the film in the cinema,

¹²² *Kentish Times*, April 21, 1939

¹²³ TNA HO 186/318, PUBLICATIONS AND PUBLICITY, Use of film “The Warning” for education of public in air warfare and for recruitment purposes. Letter from Borough of Bexley, ARP Officer to Crutchley, Public Relations Officer, Home Office, April 28, 1939.

¹²⁴ TNA HO 186/318, PUBLICATIONS AND PUBLICITY, Use of film “The Warning” for education of public in air warfare and for recruitment purposes. Letter from Corfield, British National Pictures to Crutchley, Ministry of Home Security, December 13, 1939. Corfield was basing this on the reports from

once they were enlisted in ARP or the Territorial Army, they were shown it – along with *The Gap* – during their training.¹²⁵

Mass Observation records surrounding ARP recruitment and enlistment paint a different picture of the cinema's effectiveness. Two separate surveys of ARP recruitments in Fulham (in southwest London) do not signify film as important to volunteerism. While the vast majority – seventy-eight percent – of recruits pointed to some kind of media as encouraging them enlist, the cinema seems to have been the least important. In fact, newspaper stories generated the most recruits, followed by radio, ARP booklets, leaflets, and ARP meetings. Regrettably, Mass Observation did not note the age of the interviewees, only their gender. However, given O'Brien's argument that ARP volunteers were more likely to be older and rural they would have been the least likely demographic to be in cinemas. Yet, the point that the film's effectiveness can be questioned in a broad sense still stands.¹²⁶

Despite the fact that the film helped encourage recruitment (amongst those who saw it) at least in London and was shown in large number of cinemas throughout the United Kingdom, it does not appear that it was profitable for British National, the GPO Film Unit, or the Home Office. In fact, the film actually lost £4,190, a sum that British National and the GPO Film Unit had wanted protection from before the film was produced and lobbied the Home Office and treasury to be recompensed with after the

ARP representatives at various theatres, along with newspaper reviews of the film and the reactions of cinema owners.

¹²⁵ The film was also produced in 16mm format for use in ARP and Territorial Army training centres. TNA 186/318. Letter from Crutchley to Hightet (undated).

¹²⁶ Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex, SXMO1, Topic Collections 23: Air Raids, Fulham ARP Survey.

film was completed.¹²⁷ A major part of the problem for the film's profitability stemmed from the lack of revenue generated from renting reels to cinemas, as would be the case with most films. The majority of movie houses in Great Britain were happy to show the film to their audiences, but were only willing to pay a nominal fee.¹²⁸ In fact, there was so much appetite to show the film in March and April 1939 (on account of the worsening diplomatic crisis and increasing sense that war with Germany had become inevitable) that additional prints had to be produced, actually delaying the release of the film. In contradiction to this, some at British National felt that the very same crisis actually hurt distribution of the film because, by the early summer of 1939, the increased feeling of war's inevitability left the film's message obsolete.

Conclusion

When Britain went to war in September 1939 it did so with the ranks of its volunteer air defences full (though they were not distributed where the government wanted to be), largely because the diplomatic situation in the six months before the war offered a real threat to the country, loaning itself to volunteers willing to defend the country from Nazi Germany. Neither the *The Gap* nor *The Warning*, created significant

¹²⁷ TNA HO 186/318, PUBLICATIONS AND PUBLICITY, Use of film "The Warning" for education of public in air warfare and for recruitment purposes. Letter from Corfield, British National Pictures to Crutchley, Ministry of Home Security, December 13, 1939. British National felt that since the film had helped the government in recruiting volunteers for ARP and the Territorial Army they should be compensated for their loss. The Treasury and Home Office refused to cover British National's losses for the picture because they had reached an agreement that British National would receive all profits (which they would have donated to charity) or incur all losses resulting from *The Warning*. However, the Home Office and Treasury agreed to reimburse the GPO Film Unit for their expenses related to production. The GPO Film Unit was hired by British National and the Home Office to do some location shooting for the film, and to use some of their stock footage. TNA HO 186/318, PUBLICATIONS AND PUBLICITY, Use of film "The Warning" for education of public in air warfare and for recruitment purposes. Details of Post Office Costs (undated).

¹²⁸ TNA HO 186/318, PUBLICATIONS AND PUBLICITY, Use of film "The Warning" for education of public in air warfare and for recruitment purposes. Letter from Corfield, British National Pictures to Crutchley, Ministry of Home Security, December 13, 1939

recruitment increases on a national scale. However, It is clear that those who did see the films – regrettably their number is impossible to quantify – left cinemas shaken. Newsreels depicting similar events, if we go by reactions to *The Warning*, surely had similar results. However, it is also nearly impossible to gauge exactly what impact they might have had on recruitment. Still, it may be fair to say that the government, and the production companies they cooperated with in the making of both features and newsreels, had achieved their aim: viewers were left fearing the airplane. To many, their experiences of the Second World War did not confirm the apocalyptic message pushed on viewers. London, while severely damaged by the Blitz, continued to operate as the seat government and minute portions of its buildings were destroyed and its citizens killed. Yet, for those in Coventry, and when the time came for what Bomber Command claimed was retribution, Hamburg, Cologne and Dresden knew all too well that the supposed realism of the two pictures bore little resemblance to the real horrors of being firebombed.

Conclusion

The cinema continued to be an important medium through which the British government communicated with the public after the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939. British cinema attendance remained extremely high during the war and it proved the country's most popular source for entertainment and information.¹ As during the interwar years, the British government continued to assign great importance to the cinema. The resurrected Ministry of Information and its Films Division wasted little time getting positive images of wartime Britain and the services, including the RAF, ARP, and the home defences, on the silver screen. By the end of the war the Ministry of Information had been involved in the release of 1,887 propaganda films and over 3,000 newsreels to the British public.² Similarly, film studios rushed to take advantage of buoyed interest in the military. Before the war was over, British cinemas had shown nearly 400 films about the armed services or the war effort. Clearly, by 1945 the cinema's importance to communications and image management had been firmly established.

Aerial warfare also quickly appeared on British movie screens. Most notably, Alexander Korda's *The Lion Has Wings* was released in November 1939. The film synthesized many of the ideas dealt with in this dissertation: the RAF, home defence, the threat of the bomber, and the strength of Britain's national character. It was conceived and produced by Alexander Korda, who along with fellow producer Ian Dalrymple,

¹ Angus Calder, *The People's War*, 423.

² Nicholas Pronay and Frances Thorpe, *British Official Films in the Second World War: A Descriptive Catalogue* (Oxford: Clio Press, 1980), ix.

learned from the failures of earlier films such as *The Gap* and *The Warning*. Instead of taking a simple documentary approach, Korda and Dalrymple added more narrative elements and promoted the film as a drama. Even so, their finished product remained a thinly veiled booster for the RAF and, as a result, strikingly resembled *Things to Come*, *RAF*, *The Gap*, and *The Warning*. It celebrated the freedoms enjoyed by those in Britain, as well as British fortitude. More important, it showed that German bombers attacking Britain were fated to be repelled by the RAF, the Territorial Army, and ARP.

During the Second World War, the cooperation between the government and film producers reached new levels, all through the censorship and control of the Ministry of Information and the willing participation of film studios. Yet, one of the central arguments I have attempted to advance in this dissertation is that a deep connection already existed between mass culture, government policy, and government-produced representations of the military. How studio films presented aerial warfare and pilots directly affected the way the British government presented flying and aerial warfare on the screen. The government, it seems, was avidly concerned with capturing the interest of cinemagoers and felt they could do so by presenting a comparably sensationalized version of aerial destruction to come. Conversely, it is obvious that studios and newsreel companies portrayed pilots and aerial warfare almost exactly as the government wished. The Air Ministry and RAF saw film as an effective medium for the rehabilitation of the flyer's not entirely positive public image. However, it would take the RAF's heroics during the Battle of Britain to truly cement the RAF's reputation as Britain's guardians.

In important ways, my dissertation also illustrates how universally sensationalized images of aerial destruction – Armageddon, in fact – were generally and almost

uncritically accepted by British newspapers and trade magazines. Indeed, the portrayal of aerial destruction in *Things to Come*, a big-budget feature film, was thought to be as equally valid as the same depiction in *The Gap* and *The Warning* – two films purporting to be educational, informative, official, and above all, accurate. To draw from the work of Tami Davis Biddle, it can be said that during the interwar years, the rhetoric and the alleged reality of aerial warfare were one and the same. It took weathering the Blitz in 1940 and 1941 for Britons to realize the inaccuracy of what their own government had shown them about aviation before the war.

More broadly, my dissertation contributes usefully to a number of historiographies. It enlarges upon current scholarly explanations for the origins of the many images ubiquitously associated with the aviator, whether that flyer is an RFC pilot, Snoopy in his cartoon Sopwith Camel, one of innumerable airmen fictionalized on the silver screen, or simply a commercial pilot walking down an airport concourse. Heroic notions were imported from the Edwardian period, bolstered by propaganda during the war, and disseminated by film during the interwar period. Likewise, my dissertation has added to the work of Martin Francis and connected the aviator to contemporary notions of masculinity, while showing how those manifestations were tempered by contemporary political considerations. Whether in the guise of Captain Courtney in *The Dawn Patrol*, John Cabal in *Things to Come*, the trainees portrayed in *RAF*, or the flyers leaping to defend Britain in *The Gap* and *The Warning*, Britain's cinematic pilot conformed to set notions of stoicism, strength, and technological prowess, while often embodying the war-weariness so common to the interwar period. As with the case of aerial bombardment, the British press and film publications overwhelmingly accepted this image of the flyer.

My dissertation also provides new insights into the RAF during the 1930s, an important time period for the force. Hopefully, a better understanding of how the RAF was portrayed in newsreels – as a dutiful, advanced, and skilled force – can help to explain why young Britons flocked to join despite the somewhat mixed image of the aviator and the increasing association of the airplane with death and destruction. The RAF's attempts to manage its public image and its recruitment and expansion efforts during the 1930s still have not received sufficient attention.

This dissertation adds to our understanding of the airplane's place in interwar British culture, with a specific emphasis on the centrality of the bomber and of aerial warfare in general – and, of course, on the depiction of all these things in the cinema. My dissertation likewise supported previously suggested notions that a country's aviation culture embodies certain national characteristics. As noted throughout this dissertation, the airplane was used in interwar Britain as a symbol of British strength and technological sophistication, while also acting as a rallying point for the civilian population.

There is still considerable work that could be undertaken pertaining to this project. Most notably, a more in-depth attempt to assess popular reception of these films, using a broader sampling of newspaper reviews, might be done. New databases like the British Newspaper Archive could be used to provide great insight, especially in areas outside of London. This would further illuminate the nuances of airmindedness, fear of aerial warfare in Great Britain, and the extent to which film companies were able to influence public opinion.

Those same databases would also reveal the extent to which newspapers utilized the pre-prepared newspaper stories provided by distribution companies – a central element of marketing campaigns in the 1930s. Indeed, another entire dissertation could be written on the marketing and promotional material of aviation films during the interwar period. The BFI has thousands of campaign plans and press books that have not been examined in any measurable depth. This is a treasure trove of unused information that can speak directly to what British filmmakers and cinema owners felt would be public responses to aviation films. As this dissertation has proven, this is an opportunity to examine more closely not only British air-mindedness, but also popular film tastes during the 1930s, and how the cinema interacted with other media and the government.

As noted earlier, the RAF recruitment programme after 1936 and the publicity campaigns of ARP and civil defence bear further investigation, and cultural portrayals of civil aviation still warrant extensive research. This will improve our understanding of the antecedents of the RAF's reputation in contemporary society, along with very early British government attempts to manipulate their image to suit a political, in the case a military, objective.

Hopefully, this dissertation can act as inspiration to further research on British newsreels during the interwar period. This tremendously important and influential source of news, and with it an influencer of opinion and action, has been remarkably understudied by historians. The thousands of digitized newsreels available on the sources mentioned in chapter one could be used to dramatically enhance our understanding of nearly every imaginable topic in interwar British history, particularly how those issues were presented to contemporaries.

In any event, this dissertation has made clear that British mass culture and government policy in the 1930s formed a symbiotic relationship. We would benefit by more closely pondering how the two affect each other in our own time.

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Newspapers and Magazines

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Birmingham Post
Daily Express
Daily Herald
Daily Independent
Daily Mail
Daily Mirror
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