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Lawrence Suid. *Sailing on the Silver Screen: Hollywood and the U.S. Navy.* Annapolis, M.D.: Naval Institute Press, 1996. xiv + 307 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55750-787-7.

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Positive Public Image

As the author of two previous books about film and history, Lawrence Suid's reputation as a motion picture scholar needs little introduction. Both Guts & Glory and Propaganda in America– stable titles in every bibliography–looked at America's love affair with combat photo-dramas and the influence, both overt and subliminal, that such adulation produced. Why is this? Why do male audiences, especially, adore war movies? Why do so many men plop down in front of television screens and cheer for Old Glory while crushing an empty beer can with one powerful hand? Is it some type of alter ego satisfaction? Some John Wayne syndrome? What propels such vicarious behavior?

These questions are never simple but Dr. Suid's new book, *Sailing on the Silver Screen: Hollywood and the U.S. Navy*, offers some clear answers about the relationship between audience expectations and the military service. Focusing on the men who wear bell-bottom trousers and coats of Navy blue, this book examines ninety years of filmmaking between Hollywood and America's seagoing heroes, a symbiotic relationship that allowed producers to obtain–at little or no cost–personnel, equipment, and locations for movies filled with adventure, romance, and drama. In return, Suid explains, the Navy obtained a positive public image that boosted both its recruiting efforts and its relationship with Congress.

The early silent years, of course, produced the usual two-reelers, short films that offered quick glimpses into pelagic life such as Submarine Pirate (1915) or The Hero of Submarine D-2 (1916). These titles produced jerky storylines but by the 1930's–eager to create a glamorous image of the men who traveled to the four corners of the earth–the Hollywood moguls, reinforced by a soundtrack, began a hand-in-glove relationship with the Navy and soon photoplays such as Dirigibles (1931), Hell Divers (1932), Shipmates Forever (1935), and Navy Born (1936) offered positive nautical images and suggested to Depression-weary Americans that a better world was available on the high seas. After Hitler's 1939 Poland invasion, a slew of preparatory titles–such as Wings of the Navy (1939), Flight Command (1940), and Dive Bomber (1941)–warned that the inevitable was coming up fast.

Pearl Harbor proved the filmmakers' point and soon the industry transformed into a powerful propaganda machine. Following FDR's directives, Hollywood mirrored every military branch and during the four year struggle, hundreds of flag-waving pictures–titles that glorified American prowess while vilifying the Axis scourge–gave new meaning to the Red, White, and Blue. The Navy, according to Suid, exemplified their best in The Fighting Sullivans (1944), Wing and a Prayer (1944), and Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo (1944). Other titles, such as Gung Ho (1943), The Fighting Seabees (1944), and Destination Tokyo (1943) reiterated more ocean victories. Sitting in their darkened theaters, American audiences cheered Don Ameche's carrier victory against the Imperial fleet, marveled at Cary Grant's underwater navigational dexterity in Tokyo Bay, and cried when Thomas Mitchell, the father of the five Sullivan brothers, learned that every son perished after their ship, the U.S.S. Juneau, was sunk off Guadalcanal.

Following the War, the Navy and Hollywood kept the victory parade marching in Task Force (1949), a picture that stressed the importance of aircraft carriers. Without these flattops, Gary Cooper sternly admonished, "... our West Coast newspapers right now would be printed in Japanese." Similar adulation continued through the Korean Conflict and the Cold War as improved cinematic

technology allowed for more realistic productions culminating with Tora! Tora! Tora! (1970). But, because the Vietnam fighting had boiled over, both Hollywood and Naval officials, realizing the strong opposition to this Southeast Asian war, backed away from any military photoplays. The heyday of Navy movies–glamorizing past glories–seemed over.

After the Paris peace treaty, Suid explains, a slow period of normalcy emerged and soon Hollywood cautiously returned to making Naval photo-dramas. Three titles–Gray Lady Down (1978), Raise the Titanic (1980), and The Final Countdown (1980)–did poorly at the box office but these failures were probably caused by vapid scripts that lacked empathetic characters. Finally, The Right Stuff (1983) and Top Gun (1986) put the Navy back on track with a cheer.

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