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A Feature Film about the Submarine Service: The Making of

“MORNING DEPARTURE”

In 1949 a British film was made about a submarine disaster. At that time I was Flotilla Navigating Officer in the Depot Ship HMS Maidstone, while Jeanne and our three boys lived in a rented house in Weymouth. The film company (was it J Arthur Rank?) asked via the Admiralty for some scenes to be shot in Maidstone in Portland harbour and in a submarine of her attached flotilla. I was given the job of liaising with the film company—the producer, director, actors, camera crew and so on—to advise them on naval customs and to provide any assistance with the Maidstone's ship's company, plus a submarine crew.

The story was that of a submarine which leaves a depot for a peace-time exercise, strikes a loose mine on the surface, is damaged and sinks to the bottom. The drama concerns the effect of this disaster on the crew and the efforts made by those above sea-level to save them. Most of the scenes in the submarine and the depot ship were shot in special sets built in the studios near London. So the outside scenes that I was concerned with were fairly simple—a ship's boat bringing submarine personnel to the

depot ship, a briefing of the submarine's captain on the ship's quarterdeck and the submarine's "morning departure" from alongside the ship.

I found it all fascinating and gained quite a knowledge of how films are made, and had the opportunity of meeting film stars and other British actors who were destined to become famous. When the film team first appeared on board, I was surprised to find an old friend amongst them. This was the script writer William Fairchild, who had been a Midshipman in the same ship as myself in the Mediterranean. During the war, having been invalided from the Fleet Air Arm, he wrote a book of short stories about the Navy. This was so well received that he was sent on a lecture tour of the USA to publicise the work of the RN [Royal Navy]. Having retired at the end of the war, he was now a full-time professional scriptwriter.

The producer of the film is the general managing director of the team, and no doubt it was he who organised the co-operation with the Navy. But I cannot recall him. The director, however, I do remember well—Roy Baker. He was in charge of the set-up and acting, scene by scene, and was extremely skilful in getting the best out of the actors. He was also a perfectionist. Kenneth More, then quite unknown, has a small part as the Operations Officer in the depot ship. In one short scene he had to walk out on to the quarterdeck through a door in the superstructure and make a brief report to a senior officer. But Roy Baker made him do it at least six times before he was satisfied. Later Roy Baker made an international reputation and directed such well known films as "A Night to Remember" (about the sinking of the Titanic) in 1958. As we all know, Kenneth More also became a world-known star.

The captain of the submarine was played by John Mills, who besides being a competent actor was quite and patient, not at all flamboyant. His First Lieutenant was Nigel Patrick, also well-known at that time. There seemed to be quite a contrast between the confidence of the actors in front of the camera and their diffidence and apprehensiveness while waiting for their takes. I had to check that they were wearing their uniform correctly, and Nigel Patrick kept asking "Do I look all right? Is my tie straight? Should my handkerchief show?" and so on. One peculiarity of their dress was that officers wore cream not white shirts, because the latter did not photograph well in a black and white film.

Richard Attenborough had a part as an Able Seaman who gets the jitters, a similar one to that which he had played in the war film "In Which We Serve" with Noel Coward. But in the Maidstone scenes he had little to do. Another well-known actor was Bernard Lee, who played the Captain of the depot ship and organised the rescue attempts, but these shots were done later in the studio. The Continuity Girl was rather gorgeous but she turned up in what looked like fluffy pink pyjamas and became blue with cold sitting about on a wind-swept deck. I had to get a duffel coat for her from naval stores.

I soon discovered that the activities and requirements of film people are sudden and unpredictable. "Please can e have a naval boat with 30 sailors in it in shore-going dress in 10 minutes time?!" Or when the sun went in everybody would be sitting around for what seemed like hours. Each day after the takes in Maidstone the day's filming (the "rushes") would be developed and shown in some rented place in Weymouth to the producer, director, actors and scriptwriter. There would be earnest discussions, some scenes might be changed and would need to be shot again, and the next day's work planned. Often a whole lot of script had to be re-written during the night and Bill Fairchild, who had not been renowned in the Navy for over-extending himself, told me that he had never worked so hard in his life. But he made a success of this assignment and went on to make an international reputation writing scripts for films of world-wide acclaim, including that for "The Sound of Music".

The actual departure of the submarine from alongside the ship was quite amusing. John Mills and Nigel Patrick stood up in the conning tower and gave the orders for casting off and leaving. But the real Captain and First Lieutenant were crouching down out of sight behind the bulwarks. When John Mills gave the order "Half Ahead" and the boat actually began to move, I fancied I saw a flicker of amazement cross his features as if to say "My God, she really is moving!" Then when the submarine had run clear of the depot ship's bows, up jumped the real captain and No. 1 and took charge, brought the boat back alongside. Certainly we had to do this shot several times before Roy Baker was satisfied.

On the completion of the filming in Maidstone the company gave a farewell party for all the Naval personnel who had helped. Wives were invited, so Jeanne came along and we met John Mills, his wife Hayley Bell, the novelist, and all the other actors and the rest of the team. One rather elderly actor who played a long-serving Able Seaman (a 3-badger)

was particularly charming, and we had a long talk with him. Later he won renown in a series of TV adverts for Mr Kipling's cakes.

The submariners were not too happy about this film. There had not been a peace-time submarine accident since 1939 when the Thetis was lost off Liverpool. Sailors are superstitious and they felt it was tempting providence to screen a submarine disaster. Unfortunately their fears were fulfilled even before "Morning Departure" was released. The submarine Truculent was sunk on 5th April 1950 in the Thames estuary after being in a collision with the Swedish tanker Devina. Naturally this cast a gloom over the premiere to which Jeanne and I were invited in London in the Spring of 1950. By this time I had left Maidstone and thus ended my connection with the submarine service—and also the British film industry.