

# Can Generals be Heroes?

## COMMAND DECISION

(M.G.M.)

AS the officer in charge of a division of heavy bombers based in England, Brigadier-General K. C. Dennis (Clark Gable) has ordered for the third morning in succession a "maximum effort" daylight raid on Germany. On the first day they lost 48 planes, on the second, 52. Dennis expects the losses for this day, and the following, to be equally as bad. Except for one or two associates, no one knows that the expected result of these attacks—the destruction of factories producing a revolutionary jet fighter—may decide the issue of the war. For his apparent callousness and extravagance with other men's lives, he is bitterly criticised by his superior officer (Walter Pidgeon), by the men under him (some of them anyway), by a truth-seeking war correspondent (Charles Bickford), and by a party of visiting congressmen from the States. Eventually he is removed from his command.

"No brass is a hero to me," says one of the sergeants in *Command Decision*, but the film tries to show that brass-hats can be heroes, as much so as the unnamed fliers whom they never accompany over the target. With vigour, robustness, and conviction it provides an insight into the minds of the planners who fight battles from their desks, and puts forth a plea for greater tolerance of the men who must make the decisions which lead to the loss of soldiers' lives. The strengths and weaknesses of the picture are largely tied up with its origin—a stage play by William Wister Haines. Like most movies based on plays, it is distinguished less for its spectacle and action than for its bright and often witty dialogue, and a tight, compact plot. It may be a little too wordy in parts for some tastes, but as war pictures go this is a surprisingly good one.

Of course it is grim in parts, but there are no shots of aerial combat, and little depiction of the lives of those who actually do the fighting. And since most of the action takes place at the general's quarters in the crypt of an old English abbey, it is not as harrowing as it might have been. The main outdoor sequence—a very tense one—shows Brigadier Dennis instructing a bombardier, by radio, how to land a flying fortress whose pilot and co-pilot have been put out of commission. There is plenty of humour in the picture, provided mainly by Van Johnson as a wise-cracking sergeant, and much mordant sarcasm at the expense of some cherished war-time illusions. The role of Dennis also provides Clark Gable with the opportunity for his best post-war appearance to date. Yet when the dismissed brigadier is farewelled by what is left of his command, in sorrow and affection rather than with sighs of relief, many old soldiers will, I suspect, remain unconvinced that he really was a hero. This may be partly due to the fact that Gable isn't quite big enough for his role, and partly because for 90 per cent of the rank and file of the last war, who hated fighting and referred to their generals and air

## BAROMETER

FAIR TO FINE: "Command Decision."  
OVERCAST: "A Song is Born."

marshals by such expressive nicknames as "Butch," it is just agin' nature ever to think so. Walter Pidgeon, Van Johnson, Brian Donlevy, John Hodiak and the others all give competent performances. Women are mentioned occasionally in the dialogue, but this time no female face or figure is allowed to grace the screen.

## A SONG IS BORN

(RKO-Radio)

"THIS is yum," says torch singer Virginia Mayo, coyly kissing Professor Danny Kaye on the lips. "And this," doing it again, "is yum-yum." It isn't very funny, though, and as the dazed professor dashes out to put his head under the tap, the critic longs to reach for his hat and depart. But there are another 40 minutes to go yet. In its plot *A Song Is Born* is a pale imitation of an earlier picture called *Ball of Fire* (Gary Cooper and Barbara Stanwyck). Apart from a few minutes of hot music from such experts as Benny Goodman (in disguise), Tommy Dorsey, Louis Armstrong, Mel Powell, Charlie Barnet, and others, and one or two mildly comical moments from the irrepressible Danny, this show is pretty sad stuff about cops, robbers, and the irresistible impact of jazz (when combined with Miss Mayo's brand of cheesecake) on a bunch of cloistered highbrows. Howard Hawks, who directed it, must be in his second 'teen-age.

## TRIBUTE TO ACHIEVEMENT

(Pacific Film Unit)

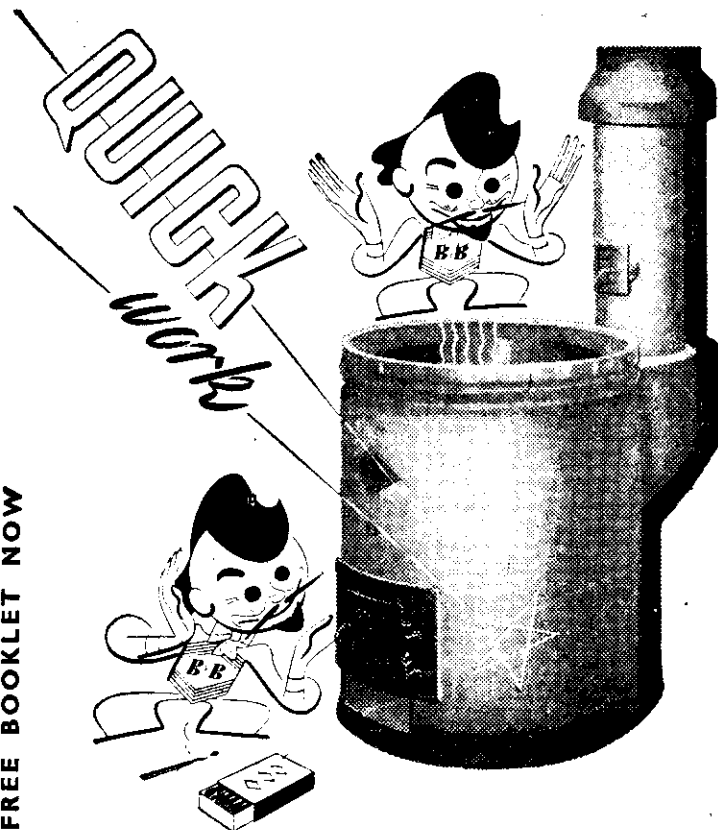
THIS is one of four well-produced 15-minute features released by a recently formed New Zealand company. It deals with the meat industry in this country, from the mustering of sheep and cattle on a Gisborne farm to the processing of carcasses in a freezing works. The other three films are *The Age Of Oil*, *A Nation On Wheels*, and *There Aren't Any Accidents*.



CLARK GABLE  
"Not quite big enough"

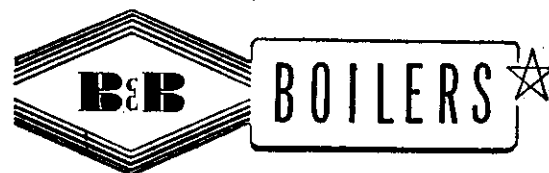
N.Z. LISTENER, OCTOBER 14, 1949.

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