


SPEAKING CANDIDLY

THIS GUN FOR HIRE

(Paramount)

 **DIRECTOR** Frank Tuttle deserves credit for providing, in *This Gun for Hire*, sustained melodrama that never slips over the edge into bathos. There are occasions when it wobbles on the brink, but a fall is prevented on all these occasions by the splendid acting of Alan Ladd, a newcomer to the screen, who plays the difficult role of Raven.


Raven is a killer. He doesn't mind killing. The explanation lies in the fact that he was neglected as a child, and that at the age of 10, he had a red-hot flat-iron thrown at him by his foster-mother. Now it's difficult to tell the flat-iron story without becoming bathetic, and it's difficult to act the villain when you're as innocently handsome as Alan Ladd. Yet he manages both convincingly.

Veronica Lake is as fluid as ever, as a night club hostess with a good line of magic, who is, incidentally, briefed by the U.S. Senate to discover just who at Nitro-Chemicals is peddling poison-gas formulae to the Japs. She acts with commendable restraint, if by restraint is meant refusal to register any facial contortion whatever when faced with immediate death, seduction by a fat fifth columnist, or misinterpretation on the part of her police-officer fiancé, Preston Foster. And when she is dragged by the Raven in a crouching position through several miles of grease-dripping tunnel, thrown over a precipice and stowed away in a deserted railway-shack, her inner and outer calm is undisturbed enough to allow her to lend a sympathetic Madonna-like countenance to the recital of the Killer's life-story, and then acknowledge the rejection of her well-meant consolation merely by a quizzical lift of the left eyebrow.

It was not till the very end of the 7,000-odd feet that we confessed to a slight feeling of disappointment. The Arch Fifth Columnist, thanks to the Lake-Ladd combination, is completely dead. And while the Raven croaks his last on the couch in the corner, Veronica sinks into the sugary embrace of her noble policeman, Preston Foster. Has she got the wrong man, we wonder? But remembering our uncompromising attitude in regard to *High Sierra*, we repress this thought as unworthy, and merely hope that next time we see him, Alan Ladd, who's got the goods, will get the woman, too.

EAGLE SQUADRON

(Wanger-Universal)

 **THIS** is not a very good film, but certainly it is not a bad one either. It is somewhere between the two. And it is best, to my mind, when it is trying to do a straight documentary job of recording what life (and death) is like to American pilots attached to the R.A.F. in England. Then it has some of the honesty and authenticity of *The Next of Kin* which, as I


mentioned the other week, comes closest of any production I have so far seen to the ideal of what a war film should be. It has also some very exciting photography of aerial combat. But Hollywood keeps on getting in the way with its formula of contrived situations and copybook heroism and romance.

Why is it, I wonder, that characters in the average war film must nearly always talk like a mixture of Winston Churchill, Quentin Reynolds, and Dorothy Thompson? There's a terrific amount of this kind of speech-making in *Eagle Squadron*. The English characters—notably Squadron-Leader John Loder and the Waaf-waisted heroine, Diana Barrymore—do it in voices practically choked with English phlegm, whereas the Americans—the boys of the Eagle Squadron—are as emotional as the others are tight-lipped. That's part of the film's theme: the way in which the Americans misunderstand the apparently callous understatement of the English. But in both cases the burden of the speech-making is the same, though I refuse to believe that the average Briton or American, caught in a tight corner, would deliver himself of an oration on the set subject of "What Democracy Means to Me" as glibly as these people do. The trouble is, I suppose, that Hollywood has made them talk like this so often that Hollywood is now afraid the public may feel itself cheated if characters talk normally when the bombs begin to fall, or the gatling jams.

Similarly, I am not convinced that in other respects besides dialogue this film is an accurate picture either of the Eagle Squadron or of England. Still, the interests of the story must be served, and these interests demand that the American hero (Robert Stack) shall eventually be decorated for defying incredible odds and bringing a secret variety of German fighter-plane successfully back to England following a commando raid on France; that his Squadron-Leader shall be killed and so leave the hero free to marry the girl ("Great girl, Ann!"); and that she in turn shall win a medal for having rescued blind patients from a bombed hospital while nurses, firemen, and other civil defence workers are conspicuous by their absence.

But you, who after all are not so concerned as the critic with what a film might be like, will probably find the false notes ringing less loudly in your ears. As a criterion of entertainment, I suggest that you might use *A Yank in the R.A.F.*—if you enjoyed that you should enjoy this. You will, I think, like Diana Barrymore (John's daughter). It is too early yet to talk about a chip off the old block, but the family likeness and the family quality are there.

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