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Hollywood Gets Its Teeth Kicked In

BY KYLE CRICHTON

Because Hollywood was both short-sighted and oversensitive, its actors and technicians are marching off to war instead of making the films essential to the war effort. Result: America faces the loss of its most valuable single morale weapon—the movies

EVERY sin Hollywood ever committed is coming home to roost. The result is that the movies are taking a terrific shellacking, and nobody dares lift a voice in protest.

What Hollywood is saying secretly and can't say publicly is: The Armed Forces are taking away all our actors, all our technical men. Things are serious now; in six months they will be desperate. But if anybody in Hollywood got up and said that unless a great change in public policy is made the movies might be out of business in six months, an exultant chorus would sweep across the country: "So *what?*"

This doesn't mean that people hate the movies; it means that they have a mental image of Hollywood parties, Hollywood swimming pools, Hollywood castles, Hollywood income-tax returns, Hollywood scandals. The idea that all this might be lost makes America laugh right out loud. Hollywood knows it and can't say a word. One peep from that sector, and the repercussions would be tumultuous.

"Go on, you dirty slackers!" the cry would come, followed by hoots, threats and vegetables.

Well, somebody had better start speaking up soon. The movies *are* threatened, and there is no use kidding about it or hiding it any longer.

I'm speaking on my own because I don't want to get anybody in Hollywood involved and I don't want anyone taking the blame for my views.

Do I care if Hollywood is seriously crippled? Yes.

Do you care if the movies go out of business? Yes.

Do either of us care if every big shot in Hollywood goes broke? *No!*

But I care and you care and America cares if anything keeps Hollywood from making the best pictures of its life in these war days.

There's a thing called morale. The word has been overworked and perhaps I shouldn't use it here. Let's

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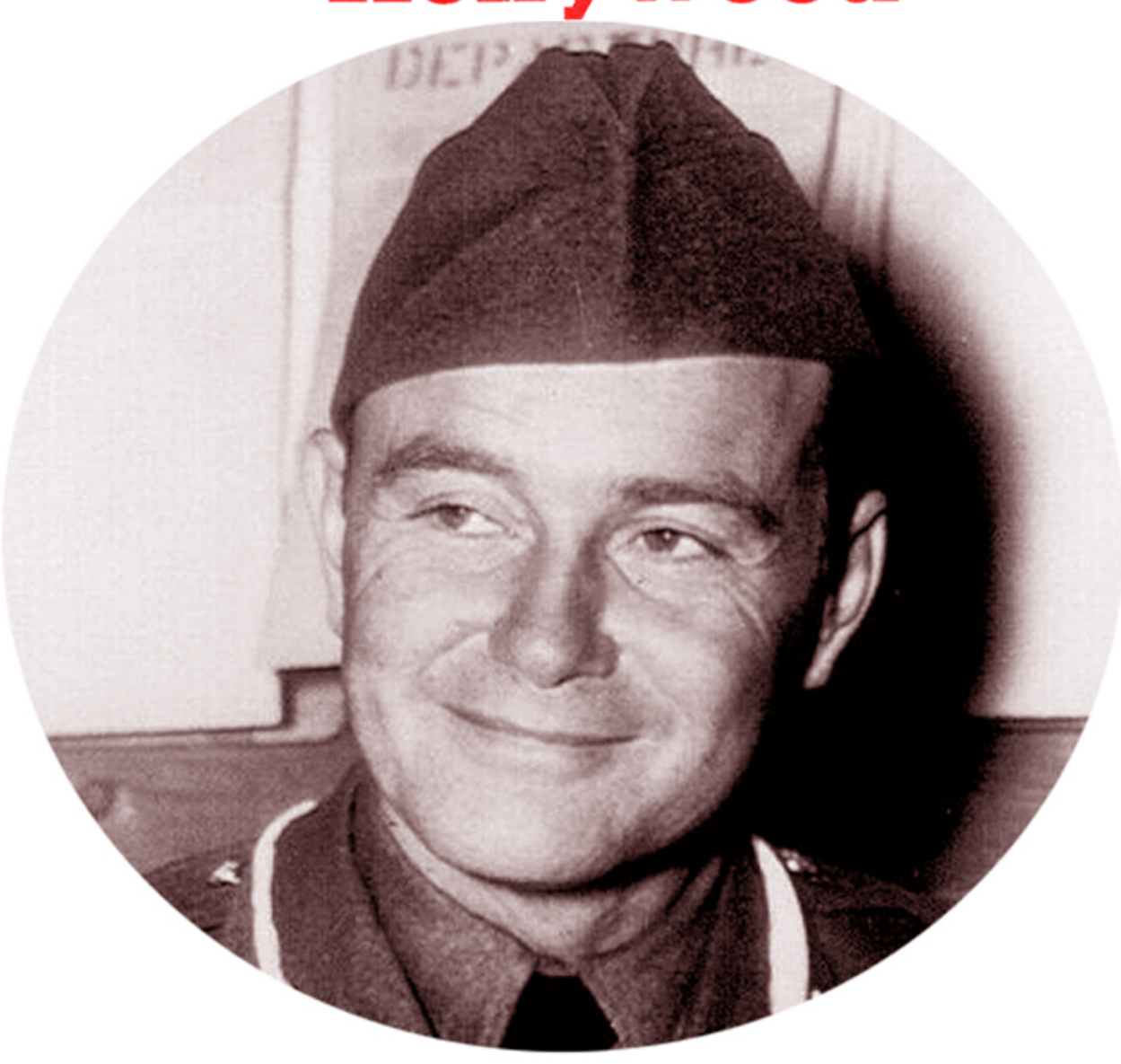

Lew Ayres
Army Medical Corps

just put it like this: We don't have movies any more, or the ones we have are inferior. Then what?

There are two ways of looking at that: (a) It would be a relief. (b) You're exaggerating.

It wouldn't be a relief because, generally and nationally speaking, we'd go nuts without the movies. When President Roosevelt wants to relax, he has a movie run at the White House. Stalin bombarded Willkie with questions about Hollywood. Churchill laughs himself back to health with Hollywood films. When we want to relax, we have a picture run for us down at the corner theater—90,000,000 of us a week planking our dough down on the ledge and getting relief from work and war and worry.

Well, that's beating an old horse; everybody admits we can't get along without the movies. And I say flatly that if the present trend keeps up, we'll either have movies so horrible that their morale value will be gone or we'll have no movies at all.

Don't be too sure that's wild talk. Hollywood itself wouldn't agree with it, but Hollywood never knows anything until it's over. Look what's happening to the strange place.

Twentieth Century-Fox has lost Tyrone Power, Henry Fonda, Victor Mature, George Montgomery and Cesar Romero. That takes every leading man they have but Don Ameche.

M-G-M has lost James Stewart, Clark Gable, Robert Montgomery, Lew Ayres, Gene Raymond and Richard Ney. Mickey Rooney and Robert Taylor will probably be gone by the time these words are in print. Spencer Tracy is breaking his neck trying to get into the service.

Practically every promising young leading man in the industry is now in the service—Robert Stack, Robert Preston, Ronald Reagan, Richard Greene, Jon Hall, Louis Hayward, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., William Holden, Jeffrey Lynn, Sterling Hayden, Tim Holt, Wayne Morris, Ray Middleton, Burgess Meredith, David Niven, Laurence Olivier, George O'Brien, Robert Sterling, Van Heflin, Melvyn Douglas.

Are there others still available for films? Well, bide your time, my friends. They'll either be on their way while you're reading these words or they'll be summoning up their courage to face the reign of terror that is now sweeping over all actors.

They tell the story of the Hollywood agent who whispered to a producer: "I got a great prospect for you—a young guy with a double hernia."

Very funny—and there actually are a few cases like that, but even these aren't going to be happy. No actor is going to be happy much longer unless he has a long gray beard and a noticeable limp. Actors uncalled in the draft because of dependents or ill health are even now reluctant to appear at camps or at benefits for soldiers and sailors. In far too many cases, they have been met with: "How's about getting into a suit, you punk?"

When Bob Hope returned from his tour of the camps in Alaska, it required all the persuasion of his friends and finally an unofficial order from Washington to keep him from enlisting. Although he has two small children and is in 3-A in the draft, he was met by a bitter cry during one show in Alaska: "You'd be even funnier in a uniform, buddy!"

The Threat of Public Scorn

Every actor in Hollywood has received angry letters asking when he's going to join up. Our armies are

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Lt. Tyrone Power
Marine Corps

fighting in Africa, in the Pacific Southwest. With the passing months, the fury of the struggle will mount. Our thoughts will be of fighting men, of bravery and victory. All other problems will seem trivial and puny. It will take a strong man to face public clamor then. The producer who comforts himself with the thought that he can get by with lesser names or older actors may find that there are no names of any sort available.

If the war lasts only another six months, what is being written here will seem the sorriest kind of nonsense. But if it lasts another two years or longer? Can we afford to neglect our strongest morale weapon? It isn't only our own problem. Without American films, the theaters of England couldn't keep open a month; Canada and Australia are in the same position. It will take a world of convincing to prove to them that Bob Hope with a rifle is as important for the purposes of the war as Bob Hope in a new comedy.

Five million Russians have lost their lives in this war. Russia has lost half its industrial capacity, half its best farm lands. Anybody is crazy who thinks Russians are strange Orientals who crave death as an adventure. They love life, they hate death, just as all of us do. But when their armies were being pushed back and their soldiers were dying by the millions, they still kept their heads. They know the worth of morale; they've built a nation on morale, they are a practical people.

Their movie stars were kept making pictures. Their stage actors continued to act. When the Germans besieged Moscow, the theaters kept playing; they are still playing in beleaguered Leningrad. The theater is brought to the trenches; the cinema is brought to the soldiers by a remarkable method of projecting films against the open sky. But actors remain actors, musicians remain musicians, dancers remain dancers.

During the crisis of last winter when it seemed certain that Moscow would fall, a Russian delegation here finally made arrangements for showing, in the Soviet Union, Charlie Chaplin's The Great Dictator.

"We need every pound of war materials we can get," they said, "but if it were a choice of sacrificing a boatload of armaments or Chaplin's picture, we would unhesitatingly take the picture."

The Russians have made no comment on American policy toward Hollywood's actors, but I have heard other foreign opinion.

"You build up the greatest good-will medium in the world," a Norwegian said to me, "and then you deliberately throw it away. Are you quite sure you know what you're doing?"

The actors themselves have asked no favors and, in fact, have refused favors. Early in the game, Clark Gable wrote to President Roosevelt, offering his services in the Armed Forces. The President, in a famous letter, advised Gable that he was far too valuable as an actor to waste his services anywhere else. It was all planned in Washington to make the movies an essential industry—and then a horrible error was made. Instead of the news coming officially from Washington, it was announced by a Hollywood producers' group

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Lt. Clark Gable
Army Air Forces

in a release from its New York office!

Because that gave the impression that Hollywood had pleaded for special dispensation, the Screen Actors Guild immediately repudiated the idea and demanded that actors be accorded no favored status. They reasoned that anything else would inevitably throw them open to the charge of draft dodging.

This was a brave, gallant, patriotic and thoroughly dumb gesture. The producers had been stupid, but the actors made certain that nothing sensible could come out of it. The Guild made the characteristic mistake of considering the actor an individual. On the contrary, an actor is a public character, created by the public and answerable to the public. In wartime, this is even more true.

Putting it bluntly, I am not concerned about the personal welfare of the actor. I care equally little about the financial woes of Hollywood. A point can be reached in the movies where top-ranking executives go into the bread line, for all I care. But I *am* concerned about American morale and I maintain that the present policy of ruining our best and chief morale-building institution is insane, suicidal and nonsensical.

I haven't mentioned the loss of technicians, although it has been a great blow to the industry, and the effect is already felt in the quality of the product. Hollywood has 186 sound cameras, which is eighty per cent of all such cameras in the world. The Army right now is in need of 300 sound cameras. Cameramen have gone by the dozens; technicians by the hundreds. According to the estimate of a man whose judgment I respect, by June of this year, Hollywood will be producing 75 per cent fewer pictures, and the quality will be little better than in the early days of sound films. This man is calculating entirely on the basis of the loss of technicians, not bothering at all about the actors.

Movies Sell America to the World

In any case, the result will be catastrophic. Anybody who has traveled in Latin America knows the influence of the American movies. Army camps in this country can't get films enough or halls enough to provide for the soldiers. When our forces went into North Africa, Hollywood films went right along, not only to entertain the fighting men but to offset *Axis and Vichy-French ideas among the natives.* As we reconquer territory, our films will do the work of selling America to the world. Before you start smiling at memories of silly films you have seen, remember that much of our store of good will as a nation comes from those very flickering images.

It is no longer a question of what the actor wants or what the producer wants; it is a national problem. In England, the authorities have permitted the loan of film stars in the Armed Forces for making pictures. Some have been propaganda films; others have been commercial films; but all are films that tell Britain's story and keep up British courage and hope.

In our case, it has reached a point where it may be necessary to *order* our actors back to Hollywood. They will refuse to come now, if it means they will be subjected to criticism from people who feel they are avoiding their military duty.

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Lt. Robert Montgomery
U.S.N.

Because of that feeling, Washington must take the lead. The time has come for Washington to proclaim the movies an essential industry, exactly as necessary as steel and coal and ships and farms. That is not merely a flowery statement. It is the plain truth that must be recognized.

Let actors be brought back from the services before it is too late. I'm not offering a plan for the best way of doing it. They can be returned to civilian life or they can remain military men who have been delegated to special detail, with the proviso that their usual salaries will be turned over to the Red Cross or the USO. Tyrone Power gets $150,000 a picture; Clark Gable is paid even more. Their contributions, added to all the others similarly detailed to the films, will raise more for charity than all the football games and charity balls ever devised.

As for the producers, if income taxes do not remove any benefit they might get from having James Stewart or Ronald Reagan working for Army pay, the government can easily see that every cent of profit is squeezed out of the transaction.

The movies are one of our lines of defense. It is as stupid to throw away a Mickey Rooney or a Henry Fonda as it would be to draft an airplane designer to make him a grease monkey.

The job is to make the best pictures in the world and to keep on making them. Putting the problem in its simplest form, Clark Gable shouldn't be *allowed* to be a soldier. War is too serious for us to be playing sentimental games. He has a duty and Hollywood has a duty and they should be made to stick to it. ★★★

Cesar Romero
Seaman, Coast Guard Reserve

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