

Mission Over Korea

More than you ever wanted to know about this 1953 B-movie starring the Stinson L-5...by Jim Gray.

Yes, it's "Big Men in Small Planes", "Ack-Ack Action Packed Adventure," and "No guns...Just Guts". These were some of the catchy (or kitschy) advertising phrases used to rouse interest in MISSION OVER KOREA, a 1953 film by Columbia Pictures that quickly faded into obscurity and is now little remembered save for a few Stinson L-5 fanatics and dedicated B-movie "cinephiles".

Released just a month after the Korean War ended, and justly described as "solid B filmmaking delivering on the promise of its garish poster art"* , this film is similar to the hundreds of other forgettable low-budget black and white war movies, spaghetti westerns, sci-fi thrillers, and horror flicks that were churned out by the movie industry in the 1940's and 50's. Despite the rigid method-acting, cliché dialogue, fake-looking back-projection scenes and predictable story line typical of that era, this docu-drama is nevertheless interesting both for the cast and production crew as well as the starring role played by the Stinson L-5.

At 86 minutes, the film is tolerably short for those who don't care for melodramatic war movies, but L-5 lovers will happily find that roughly half the film is dedicated to aerial footage, ground shots with the aircraft visible in the background, or studio close-ups of the actors "flying" the planes (*hmmm...that plane doesn't have any wings!*).

Some of the aerial footage was shot on location in Japan and Korea using actual military aircraft, but most of the scenes were filmed in southern California using L-5's most likely provided by Paul Mantz. While the sharp eye will notice that the flight sequences can be narrowed down to the same dozen or so "takes" made from various camera angles, the movie still gives a lot of "bang-for-the-buck" to those who are primarily interested in the flying.

Look too closely however and you'll notice a lot of discrepancies, such as cutting back and forth between shots of L-5 observer and ambulance models that are ostensibly one and the same plane. Even the tail numbers are duplicated to give the illusion that these are the same aircraft. Presumably the filmmaker thought the general audience would never notice such inconsistencies, but it is annoying to viewers who recognize such cheap tricks.

Taken seriously, one can find a lot of fault with *Mission Over Korea*, but it can be great entertainment to pick apart all the technical faults and make fun of both the action and the dialogue which include corny jokes, barely concealed sexual innuendo, social stereotypes that are no longer "politically correct", silly antics by the slapstick aircraft

* quote from the [Monster B-Movie Archive](#) review guide



Colorful 24"x36" one-sheet lobby poster. Three-sheet prints in similar themes, measuring up to 36"x 72", are prized by war movie poster collectors. Printed on little more than newsprint, these posters are hard to find in good condition.

mechanics, and one very fake looking fight scene where the "communist insurgent" bad guys are dressed like gangsters in black hats and, incongruously, long whitish overcoats that look suspiciously like hospital smocks. Oh, and don't forget the P-51 "Yaks" with Chinese markings.

Despite the B-movie quality (as one friend put it, B stands for "bottom of the barrel"), *Mission Over Korea* has quite a remarkable pedigree and features some very interesting talent, both on the screen and off. Given the cast and production crew assembled for the film, perhaps the story could have been massaged into a hit instead of a box office bust, but even if that had been the case, the competition from other films made that year was fierce.

Certainly 1953 was a big year in filmmaking, so it is easy to see how "the L-5 movie" was dwarfed by other

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productions. Among them was another documentary-style war movie released by Columbia Pictures titled *From Here to Eternity* starring Burt Lancaster and Frank Sinatra, who helped secure the coveted Best Picture award. Other notable movies that year included *The Robe* with Richard Burton and Jean Simmons (financially the most successful offering of 1953), *Roman Holiday* with Gregory Peck, Audrey Hepburn and Eddy Albert, *Moulin Rouge* with Jose Ferrer and Zsa Zsa Gabor, *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* with Marilyn Monroe, Jane Russell and Charles Coburn, and *How to Marry a Millionaire* also featuring Marilyn Monroe along with Betty Grable, and Lauren Bacall.

Top billed for *Mission Over Korea* were John Hodiak, John Derek, Maureen O'Sullivan and Audrey Totter. Aside from former film queen O'Sullivan, who was *Tarzan's* scantily-clad (scandalously so for that time) Jane in six films from 1932 to 1942, the other players did not have strong viewer appeal compared to the big stars featured in the other pictures released that year. We'll examine our cast in more intimate detail later.



O'Sullivan (L), Hodiak (C) and Derek (R)

The film was made by producer Robert Cohn (related to Harry Cohn, then president of Columbia Pictures). In all, Cohn only produced about a dozen films from 1948 to 1950, all as unsuccessful as *Mission Over Korea*, and then he sank into obscurity, resurfacing but one more time in 1964 with his production of the medical drama and semi-flop *The New Interns*. Perhaps his inability to produce successful films can be attributed to the limited budgets he was allowed, since there was no lack of talent in the people he selected to work for him.

The three screenwriters employed by Cohn were Jesse Lasky Jr., Eugene Ling, and Martin Goldsmith, and they did a passable job with the story sequence, although the dialogue is unnaturally contrived and very stilted at times. Of course this trait is the hallmark and common

denominator of most other contemporary movies, giving them a certain loveable quality that some buffs of older films adore.

Of the three writers, only Laskey went on to have a prolific screenwriting career and two of his more memorable works included movie blockbuster *The Ten Commandments* and the popular TV series *The Saint*. The two others writers, though modestly successful, were not as highly sought for their writing talent so they predominantly worked on B-movies. Ling was better known as a producer and actor while novelist Goldsmith (brother-in-law to screen star Anthony Quinn) made a serious mark with his introspective film-noir characterizations in movies such as *Detour*.

The *Mission Over Korea* screenplay was based on a short story of the same title by writer and war correspondent Richard Tregaskis, well known for his best-selling book *Guadalcanal Diary* and critically acclaimed for his later television documentary series *The World at War*. Tregaskis' courageous (he was critically wounded in Italy) front line coverage during several WWII campaigns, the Korean war, and the Vietnam war made him one of the most celebrated and respected field journalists of his day.

Director Fred F. Sears orchestrated over four dozen films during the 1950's, all considered B-movies, and many are now appreciated as true classics by students of this quirky genre. Once you've seen some of his other films you'll instantly recognize the strong influence Sears had on *Mission Over Korea*. During his prolific career, the diverse Sears seems to have given about equal attention to horror, science fiction, war movies, westerns, and "bad-boy" films. Among his many creations are *The Werewolf*, *The Giant Claw*, *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers*, *El Alamein*, *The Nebraskan*, *Rock Around the Clock*, *Escape From San Quentin*, and *Teenage Crime Wave*.

The diverse soundtrack on *Mission Over Korea* is also very interesting, mostly for the people who worked on it. Music direction was assigned to the hugely prolific Russian immigrant-composer Mischa Bakaleinikoff. He composed or arranged music for literally hundreds of films, so his work is nearly inescapable no matter what you choose to watch. Perhaps the most famous of his work, while certainly not his best, is found in the dozens of *Three Stooges* episodes that are near and dear to many film comedy fans.

Although the music in *Mission Over Korea* doesn't exactly set your foot to tapping, the mostly orchestral mix is fairly typical for the early 1950's and seamlessly fits both the time period and mood of the film, emphasizing tension, drama and emotion in the lulls between spoken dialogues. Directed by Bakaleinikoff, the score was mostly written by

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composers Dimitri Tiomkin and George Duning. They aren't listed in the film credits but their creation is technically interesting with occasional avant-garde flourishes in the style of Edgar Varese, father of electronic music. Both men went on to have extraordinary careers, and while these names may not immediately ring bells for you, they composed music for over three hundred films and television shows. Two famous and instantly recognizable compositions by them include the *Rawhide* theme by Tiomkin and the *Star Trek* theme by Duning.

Selected as Director of Photography, Sam Leavitt is credited with the cinematography on fifty-one films, including such greats as *Exodus*, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, *Anatomy of a Murderer*, *A Star is Born*, *Cape Fear*, *Shock Treatment*, *An Annapolis Story*, *The Court Marshall of Billy Mitchell*, and *Incredible Journey*. He is also credited with numerous episodes of the television serials *I Love Lucy* and *Batman*. While *Mission Over Korea* doesn't count among Leavitt's best work, particularly for the lack of innovative and imaginative camera work, it is also far from badly done considering the wide range of challenges he faced with filming on location and capturing the aerial scenes. One has to guess that a lot of his most excellent shots ended up on the cutting room floor as often occurs when the film editor takes over.

Getting back to the cast of *Mission Over Korea*, who were not particularly big stars of the silver screen, one nevertheless finds some very interesting personalities.

The leading males and "stars" of our film were John Hodiak and John Derek, playing Captain George Slocum and Lieutenant Pete Barker respectively. These two movie stalwarts never commanded the huge attention garnered by other contemporary actors such as Burt Lancaster, Gregory Peck, Frank Sinatra, Jimmy Stewart, and others. However, between the two, they appeared in approximately seventy films, not a small accomplishment in the film business.

Rugged looking John Hodiak played numerous tragic hero roles, particularly in his portrayal of soldiers in such movies as *Dragonfly Squadron*, *The Cain Mutiny Court Martial*, *A Bell for Adano*, Alfred Hitchcock's thriller *Lifeboat* (starring role) and even the cheesy 1976 *Once Before I Die*. Perhaps his most unusual role was as the Native American Indian Cochise in a western titled *The Conquest of Cochise*. Hodiak also earned a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame for his important early work in radio broadcasting in Detroit.

Suavely handsome John Derek became a notable if not highly acclaimed writer, director and cinematographer, but prior to that he played both lead and supporting roles in such films as *The Adventures of Hajji Baba*, *The Outcast*,

Exodus, *The Ten Commandments*, and *An Annapolis Story*. Most of his other films were B-quality westerns though he brilliantly played Abraham Lincoln's deranged killer John Wilkes Booth in the 20th Century Fox hit *Prince of Players*. Derek probably received as much notoriety for his three wives, Ursula Andress, Linda Evans, and sex symbol Bo Derek, as he did for his professional accomplishments.



Two of approximately a dozen 11"x14" lobby cards used as advertising for the movie.

Maureen O'Sullivan, one of the two leading ladies, played a relatively minor role as the wife of Captain Slocum (John Hodiak). She has already been mentioned for her *Tarzan* movies, but she also appeared in an astonishing sixty-eight films between 1930 and 1988, so few movie-goers can claim they've never heard of her. Some of the most popular early films she had a prominent, if ingénue, role in include *The Thin Man* and the Marx Brothers classic hit *A Day at the Races*. One of her last appearances at the age of 77 was in the 1988 picture titled "Peggy Sue Got

Married". The busy Maureen O'Sullivan also found time to raise seven children, including film starlet Mia Farrow.

Maureen Totter (Army nurse "Kate") is the other leading lady and played a far more important role in *Mission Over Korea* than O'Sullivan. Totter, an actress since high school, rose to become known as "the queen of film noire". She appeared in forty films between 1944 and 1979, playing femme fatales and no-nonsense tough girls in such classics as *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Lady in the Lake*, *Women's Prison*, and *A Vanishing American*. Coming out of retirement, she played a recurring role in the television series *Medical Center* during the 1970's.

The "bit parts" in *Mission Over Korea* are played by perhaps the most interesting people of all. Dabbs Greer (playing a pilot) had a phenomenal career and filled supporting roles in over a hundred films and seventy-four stage plays. While space cannot be devoted to them all here, it is worth looking Greer up to see his dizzying array of work, which spanned playing a bridge guard (not credited) in *Reign of Terror* in 1949 to portraying inmate "Old Paul Edgecomb" in the 1999 prison thriller *The Green Mile*. For this role he was nominated as Best Supporting Actor. Born in 1917, Dabs Greer was still regularly performing on television at age 85.

Other performances in *Mission Over Korea* that are worth mentioning are those by the comedic pair Richard Erdman (as Corporal Swenson) who appeared in forty-five films, and Harvey Lembeck (Sgt. Maxie Steiner) who appeared in twenty nine pictures, plus two TV series. These two masters of slapstick lighten the otherwise dour tone of the movie. Actors Rex Reason (as Major Hacker) and Todd Karns (as Lt. Jerry Barker), who held relatively minor parts, played supporting roles in seventeen and nineteen films respectively from 1941 to 1959.

For Chinese actor William Chung, who enthusiastically played the orphan boy "Clancy", this was his only other film beside his 1951 appearance in *The Steel Helmet* as a boy nicknamed "Short Round". An interesting bit of trivia is that Indy's entertaining dog called Short Round (Shorty) in *Indiana Jones* was named after screenwriter Willard Huyck's dog, which was supposedly named for Chung's character in *Mission Over Korea*. Some sources say that after the movie was completed Willie Chung moved back to Hong Kong and later worked behind the scenes on some of the well-known Bruce Lee karate movies, but this is unconfirmed.

The other "actors" that require mentioning are the airplanes themselves. There were at least four, and possibly six, L-5's used in the movie. One of the planes filmed in Korea, an observer model, is now in possession



Another colorful poster produced for a Latin American audience. This one was found in Argentina. It is unknown whether the movie was subtitled or overdubbed in Spanish.

of SOPA member John Davidson. It not only flew active duty in Korea but saw service in Japan and ended up with a military flying club at Kadena Air Base on Okinawa before eventually returning stateside. Another plane that was very prominently featured in the movie is an L-5G (ambulance model) now owned by SOPA member Forrest Wood. This was one of the planes used for the outdoor static and flying sequences most likely shot at or near Lake Ellsinore airport in southern California.

Sadly, two aircraft were obviously destroyed "for effect" in the movie; one was crashed into a hillside by Lt. Barker (John Derek's character) and the other was nosed over and burned in the very last scene. Of course, surplus L-5's were cheap and plentiful in those days, so they were considered expendable by the movie makers.

Mission Over Korea can be found on VHS (and now DVD) as it was re-released in 1981 for the lucrative home video market, but it is only carried by a few outlets. An internet search should turn something up if you would like to purchase a copy. The UK release of the film was titled *Eyes in the Sky*.