1929 Academy Awards for Best Picture (Wellman) and Best Effects, Engineering Effects (Roy Pomeroy)
1997 Selected for National Film Registry

Directed by William A. Wellman
Based on a story by John Monk Saunders
Screenplay by Hope Loring and Louis D. Lighton
Produced by B.P. Schulberg (associate producer) and Lucien Hubbard (producer, uncredited)
Original Music by J.S. Zamecnik
Cinematography by Harry Perry
Film Editing by E. Lloyd Sheldon (editor-in-chief) and Lucien Hubbard
Art Direction by Hans Dreier
Costume Design by Travis Banton and Edith Head
Conductor (2012 restored score): Peter Boyer
Arranger and orchestrator (2012 restoration): Dominik Hauser

F.M. Andrews.... commander: military pilots
S.C. Campbell....supervisor: flying sequences
Sterling Campbell....technical director: flight sequences
James A. Healy.... supervisor: flying sequences
A.M. Jones.... supervisor: ground troop maneuvers
E.P. Ketchum.... supervisor: trench system reproduction
F.P. Lahm.... commander: military pilots
Robert Mortimer.... ordnance supervisor
Ted Parson.... supervisor: flying sequences
Carl von Haartman.... supervisor: flying sequences

Clara Bow...Mary Preston
Charles 'Buddy' Rogers...Jack Powell
Richard Arlen...David Armstrong
Jobyna Ralston...Sylvia Lewis
El Brendel...Herman Schwimpf
Richard Tucker...Air Commander
Gary Cooper...Cadet White
Gunboat Smith...The Sergeant
Henry B. Walthall...David's Father
Roscoe Karns...Lt. Cameron
Julia Swayne Gordon... David's Mother

Arlette Marchal...Celeste
Hedda Hopper...Mrs. Powell
Carl von Haartman...German Officer
Gloria Wellman...Peasant Child
William A. Wellman...Doughboy


Lucien Hubbard (December 22, 1888, Fort Thomas, Kentucky – December 31, 1971, Beverly Hills, Los Angeles, California) has 59 producer credits, some of which are 1940 Street of Memories, 1940 Youth Will Be Served, 1940 The Bride Wore Crutches, 1939 Nick Carter, Master Detective, 1939 6,000 Enemies, 1938 The Texans, 1937 Ebb Tide, 1937 Song of the City, 1937 Under Cover of Night, 1936 Sinner Take All, 1936 The Longest Night, 1936 Speed, 1936 Moonlight Murder, 1935 Here Comes the Band, 1935 Public Hero #1, 1935 Shadow of Doubt, 1934 Straight Is the Way, 1934 You Can't Buy Everything, 1927 The Rough Riders, and 1927 Wings.


“WILLIAM WELLMAN” entry by John A. Gallagher

born February 29, 1896 Brookline MA.

“Wild Bill”

Expelled from Newton High for dropping a stink bomb on the principal’s head. Wellman worked briefly and ingloriously in the wool, candy, and lumber trades before a plane flight revealed his true vocation: “I just had to fly.”

In 1917 Wellman went to war to become a flier. He joined the French Foreign Legion—a necessary (and traumatic) preliminary—and then the Lafayette Flying Corps, an offshoot of the
more famous Lafayette Escadrille. As a fighter pilot with the Black Cat squadron, Wellman shot down three German aircraft before his own plane was brought down, leaving him with back injuries that troubled him for the rest of his life.

Wellman left the Lafayette Flying Corps in March 1918 with a Croix de Guerre and several American citations and returned to a hero’s welcome in Boston. With the help of a ghostwriter he described his adventures in Go, Get ‘Em, published in Boston in late 1918. By that time he was serving in the American Air Corps as a flight instructor at Rockwell Field, San Diego, not very far from Hollywood. “There were a lot of strange new people there,” he said. “actors and actresses, and they liked me and the uniform and the medals; and I was very humble and my limp was eye-catching.” Before the war was over, Wellman was married to a beautiful young starlet, Helene Chadwick. They separated a month later and were subsequently divorced.

Released from the Air Corps at the end of the war, Wellman remembered the telegram he had received from Douglas Fairbanks congratulating him on his war efforts and offering him a job. Donning his uniform and his medals, he went to see Fairbanks, by then a major star, and was promptly given a sizable part in comedy Western, The Knickerbocker Buckaroo (1919). Wellman found himself excited by the movie business but disgusted by the sight of himself on screen at the premiere, mugging in thick makeup: “I stayed for just half the picture and then went out and vomited for no reason at all.”

If he could not stomach so unmanly a profession as acting, Wellman was not ready to give up on Hollywood. Discovering how much Al Parker had been paid for The Knickerbocker Buckaroo. He decided that he could be happy behind the camera. He started modestly as a messenger at the Goldwyn studios (where he had to deliver fan mail to his estranged wife). Wellman took every chance he could to study the working methods of staff directors like Maurice Tourneur, Frank Lloyd, and Tod Browning. In A Short Time for Insanity, his autobiography, he said that he “stole scripts, new ones, old ones, and pored over them, always from a director’s point of view.”

The ambitious messenger caught the attention of Will Rogers, through whose influence he was soon promoted to assistant propman. But Wellman’s real break came when General Pershing visited the Goldwyn studios and recognized the ex-aviator (from a wartime encounter in a Paris brothel, according to Wellman). The front office was impressed by this comradely meeting, and Wellman was promoted to assistant director, in this capacity working for Clarence Badger, E. Mason Hopper, and Alfred Green before moving to the Fox studio in late 1921. At Fox, Wellman was assistant to Harry Beaumont, Colin Campbell, Emmett Flynn, and his mentor Bernard J. Durning. The latter is now almost forgotten, but Wellman told Kevin Brownlow that Durning “gave me two of the greatest years I ever had and taught me more than anybody in the business, He made all those thrilling melodramas and you learned everything from tem—action, pacing, stunts. This was the greatest school a director ever had.”

When Durning became ill during the making of The Eleventh Hour (1923), Wellman stepped in to finish the picture, pleasing the Fox executives enough to make him a full-fledged director. His first feature was a Dustin Farnum vehicle, The Man Who Won (1923). A succession of low-budget Buck Jones melodramas followed. When they proved moderately successful. Wellman asked for a raise and was promptly fired. It was the first of his many battles with executives and producers. Thanks to his intransigent nature, “Wild Bill” subsequently worked in every major studio in Hollywood, with the exception of Universal.

Out of work for a year, Wellman joined MGM in 1925, taking a demotion to assistant director. Soon afterwards he met a singer and dancer named Margery Chapin and embarked on another short-lived marriage. After “doctoring” Robert Vignola’s The Way of a Girl and Josef von Sternberg and Phil Rosen’s The Exquisite Sinner, Wellman was given a project of his own, The Boob, one of Joan Crawford’s first movies, and, the director proudly claims, her worst.

Completed in September 1925, The Boob was not released for six months and so was preceded into theatres by Wellman’s next picture When Husbands Flirt, made for Columbia in 1925. Wellman was already building a reputation as a phenomenally rapid worker, and tempted by a bonus, he filmed this Dorothy Arzner script in less than four days. The independent producer B. P. Schulberg was impressed and signed Wellman to a contract with his Preferred Pictures. When Schulberg joined Famous Players-Lasky (soon to become Paramount), he took the young director with him.

Wellman’s first film at Paramount was (in his own words) an “atrocious” comedy, The Cat’s Pajamas (1926)—an ill-advised attempt to make an adult star of the child actress Betty Bronson. Wellman was almost fired, but Paramount gave him one more chance with You Never Know Women (1926), adapted by Benjamin Glazer from a story by Ernest Vajda. It was a backstage romance with Florence Vidor as the star of a Russian theatrical troupe, Lowell Sherman and Clive Brook as the two men who want her.

This has been called the most “European” of Wellman’s films, showing the influence of German expressionism in Victor Milner’s dramatic lighting, and full of bravura effects. A memorable example occurs in the climactic scene when the heroine, pursued through the darkened theatre by the lustful Sherman, jumps into a magician’s rigged cabinet and disappears in a puff of smoke. Notably well acted, the picture was both a critical and commercial success, rehabilitating Wellman’s reputation at Paramount.

When King Vidor’s The Big Parade and Raoul Walsh’s What Price Glory? registered at the box office, Paramount wanted its own World War I epic. They settled on a flying story suggested by John Monk...
Saunders, himself a wartime pilot. Although Wellman had only minor credits up to that time, he was the only director in Hollywood with aerial combat experience, and with Schulberg’s support, he was handed this choice assignment. John Monk Saunders was sent to Washington to solicit government help. And in the end, according to Kevin Brownlow. Wings “tied up thousands of soldiers, virtually all the pursuit planes the air force had. Billions of dollars worth of equipment—and some of the finest military pilots in the country.” There were angry speeches in Washington before the shooting was completed.

Wings (1927) was the first important picture to deal with the role of the plane in World War I. It also embodied several themes dear to Wellman’s heart—the romantic triangle, often squared by the self-abnegation of one of the rivals; male friendship; and the horseplaying but deeply felt comradeship of groups of men engaged in some shared—and usually dangerous—endeavor. Wings follows the wartime fortunes of two young fighter pilots, played by Charles “Buddy” Rogers and Richard Arlen. Rivals for the love of the same woman, they become friends after a bloody fistfight. In the end, through a tragic (or melodramatic) accident, Rogers shoots down and kills Arlen when the latter is escaping from the enemy lines in a German plane. Since both male leads were virtually unknown, the studio cast its biggest box-office draw, Clara Bow, as the heroine.

Wellman, known as a “one take” director, became a perfectionist in the filming of Wings, shooting scenes over and over again until he was satisfied with them. Up to that time, most “aerial” scenes had actually been shot on the ground, but in this film Wellman stipulated that there should be no faking. The cinematographer Harry Perry and his huge team of cameramen shot close-ups of the flyers from the rear cockpits of their planes and followed dogfights from a whole squadron of camera planes.

The movie’s climax is a reenactment of the Battle of Saint Mihiel, shot on the plains outside San Antonio, Texas. A huge area was pounded by field guns until it became a convincing replica of the mud and chaos on the western front. A battery of cameras was mounted on a hundred-foot tower, with a further array of twenty-eight hand-held Eyemos in other strategic positions. The battle itself was planned like a real one by army officers in consultation with filmmakers, and 3,500 troops and sixty pilots were rehearsed for ten days. Previewed in San Antonio as a fourteen-reeler, Wings was cut to 12,300 feet for its New York premiere, when the major scenes were projected in Magnascope on a double-size screen. Then or later (accounts differ), sound effects were added to convey the din of battle.

Wings was a huge success, praised by flyers for its authenticity and by critics for its spectacle. Photoplay’s reviewer found the melodramatic plot “weakly built” and lacking in conviction, “with the exception of several touching scenes,” but many agreed with Quinn Martin that “there has been no movie…which has surpassed it in impressing upon an audience a feeling of personal participation.” In its day, the film had an impact on popular culture comparable to that of Star Wars. The aviator became the favorite hero of boys’ adventure stories, and the movie’s financial success precipitated a ‘whole cycle of flying dramas, including Howard Hawks’ Dawn Patrol (1930) and Howard Hughes’ Hell’s Angels (1930). It made stars of both Rogers and Arlen and also boosted the career of Gary Cooper, who made a strong impression in a brief scene in a training camp. Wings received the first Oscar ever awarded for best picture of the year, establishing Wellman as a major director at the age of thirty-one.

Writing in 1978 in The War, the West, and the Wilderness, Kevin Brownlow wrote that “Wings gets better the older it becomes. Values that once seemed overly sentimental now seem so much a part of their time that they no longer irritate. For most of its length, Wings avoids the grimness of war and captures exactly the fierce romanticism that so many veterans feel for it….Wellman hurls his camera around the vast battlefield with exhilarating abandon. Even by today’s standards, his setups seem remarkably bold. Although troops die with rather operatic gestures, his epic handling of the big drive is overwhelming, and the superimposition of thousands of men marching into a horizon where their destruction is pictured in split screen is a moment worthy of Abel Gance’s classic J’accuse.”

Gary Cooper starred in Wellman’s next movie, The Legion of the Condemned (1928), another World War I aviation drama, with Fay Wray as a beautiful spy. Scripted by John Monk Saunders, and using a great deal of material originally shot for Wings, it was generally well received. Not so Ladies of the Mob (1928), Wellman’s first crime movie, in which he worked once more with Clara Bow and Richard Arlen. Mordaunt Hall found it gloomy, artificial and unedifying.”

Ladies of the Mob appears to be a lost film, like the majority of Wellman’s silents. An exception—and one of his best early films—is Beggars of Life (1928) featuring Arlen, Louise Brooks, and Wallace Beery. Brooks gave one of her best performances as a girl who kills her foster father when he tries to rape her, and then goes on the run with a gentle young hobo. Most of the picture was shot in Jacumba, California, near the Mexican border, where Wellman and his crew are said to have plunged into a riotous two weeks of drinking, gambling, and brawling. Margaret Chapin accompanied her husband to Jacumba, acting as a script girl, but the marriage ended soon afterward.

Beggars of Life, which offers the first clear indication of Wellman’s burgeoning social conscience, includes one sound scene in which Beery, as the truculent bum Oklahoma Red, sings a song. Told that Beery would have to stand motionless in this scene because the microphone was immovable, Wellman (according to eyewitness David Selznick) hung it on a broom handle and shot the scene with Beery singing as he walked. Wellman thus joins the sizable company of directors credited with the invention of the boom microphone.
Whether or not the claim is correct. Beggars of Life, as Frank Thompson writes, “is a testament of Wellman’s exhilaration with movement”—a film about movement, about people who are bound to advance constantly. The story and acting are simple catalysts that make the motion occur.” On the basis of this film and Wings, Wellman was named by Film Daily as one of the world’s best directors for 1928-1929.

He made the transition to sound easily, and as Thompson says, his first talkies “moved just as much as his silents,” differing from them mostly in the matter of close-ups. Wellman said, “You use close-ups…to get a point over.” With dialogue to do this for him, he seldom moved in closer than a medium shot, even at moments of high drama.

Wellman’s relationship with Paramount, always shaky, was turning sour. His early sound films there were strictly routine assignments….Disarmingly modest about his work, Wellman said that “for every good picture, I made five or six stinkers. But I always tried to do it a little differently. I don’t know whether I accomplished it, but I tried.” In the opinion of his admirers, he succeeded much better than he has been given credit for….

Wellman made one more film at Paramount, another variation on the Wings formula called Young Eagles (1930), then broke his contract to join Warner Brothers-First National. At about the same time he married a polo-playing flyer named Marjorie Crawford—another short-lived union. Wellman stayed with Warners for three years, finding a kindred spirit in the tough young production chief Darryl F. Zanuck. His first two Warner assignments showed his versatility—the football musical Maybe It’s Love (1930) with Joe E. Brown, and the railroad drama Other Men’s Women (1931), starring Mary Astor and featuring in minor roles Joan Blondell and James Cagney.

Cagney was originally cast as the protagonists’s sidekick in Wellman’s next picture The Public Enemy (1931) but, on the director’s recommendation, wound up with the lead role. The movie traces the rise and fall of a Chicago mobster, Tom Powers. It was made in twenty-six days at a cost of $151,000. Economically photographed by Dev Jennings, it made excellent use of stock shots of turn-of-the-century Chicago in a scene-setting prologue. It is said that Wellman shot only 360 feet of film that was not used in the final cut.

Zanuck had been dubious about the project, believing that the gangster genre was played out. Wellman won him over by promising to make The Public Enemy “the toughest goddam one of them all.” He succeeded, especially in the notorious scene in which Cagney mash half a grapefruit into the face of his mistress (Mae Clarke) and the nightmarish finale, when Tom Powers’ trussed and bullet-ridden corpse is delivered to his mother’s house (where she is playing “I’m Forever Blowing Bubbles” on the Victrola).

The film’s tight editing, mobile camerawork, and powerful use of sound, together with Cagney’s electric performance, made it, as Variety’s Reviewer wrote, the “toughest, toughest, and best of the gang films to date…It’s lowbrow material given such workmanship as to make it highbrow.” Richard Watts Jr. went further, finding in the picture “a quality of grim directness, Zolaesque power, and chilling credibility which makes it far more real and infinitely impressive than the run of gangster films.”

Wellman flourished at Warners, where his taut style was ideally suited to the studio’s tabloid approach to contemporary issues. The speed and economy of his filmmaking was much appreciated by the thrifty Jack Warner. Having propelled Cagney to stardom in the Public Enemy, he set Barbara Stanwyck on the same path in Night Nurse (1931), a lurid but fast-paced and highly entertaining thriller. Stanwyck plays an idealistic young nurse who rescues two little girls from the clutches of a murderous doctor and his brutal chauffeur (Clark Gable). Wellman was notoriously more at home with actors than actresses, but the tough and infalzable Stanwyck was an exception, and he made several more movies with her, at Warners and elsewhere.

At this point in his career Wellman was churning out movies at the rate of five or six a year. Few of them are of much artistic interest, though several are remarkable for the candor with which they address America’s problems during the depression. Notable examples are The Conquerors (1932) made on loan to RKO and drawing parallels between the Depression and the earlier economic collapse of 1873, and Heroes for Sale (1933). The latter had Richard Barthelmess as a wounded war hero who comes home addicted to the morphine administered to him as a painkiller. Cured of his addiction, he reenters society in the midst of the depression, confused and disillusioned, his job gone, his wife dead. This film offers an astonishingly bleak view of the American dream gone wrong. The upbeat ending, pinning its faith on President Roosevelt’s inaugural address, struck many critics as artificial and unconvincing.

In the same year (1933), which saw the release of no fewer than seven of his pictures, Wellman made one of the best films of his career, Wild Boys of the Road. Scripted by Earl Baldwin, it shows how, little by little, a bunch of middle-class young people have their Andy Hardy certainties stripped away from them by the deepening Depression until they are forced to live on the run, stealing and begging to survive. As in Heroes for Sale, the film’s bleak message is softened at the end. Charged with vagrancy and armed robbery, the central trio are told by a magistrate sympathetic to the New Deal that “things are going to get better now.” The largely unknown cast was headed by Frankie Darro, Rochelle Hudson, and Dorothy Coonan, the nineteen-year-old dancer who in March 1934 became Wellman’s fourth (and last) wife, and in time the mother of their seven children. [She was actually his fifth wife. His first, a Frenchwoman, was not revealed until much later.]
Wild Boys did poorly at the box office and had a mixed reception from contemporary critics. A reviewer in the New York Times wrote that “by endowing the film with a happy ending, the producers have robbed it of its value as a social challenge.” On the other hand, William Troy thought that “never before does one recall having witnessed an American picture whose climax is made to consist in a pitched battle between a band of ragged outlaws and the police, in which the sympathy is manifestly with the former.” The film’s reputation has grown since then. It has found its way onto a number of college courses, and Todd McCarthy, in Jean-Pierre Coursodon’s American Directors, goes so far as to describe it as “Wellman’s one film with a claim to greatness.”

Wellman had put a great deal of himself into Wild Boys and was stung by its apparent failure. His next Warners assignment was a college musical, College Coach (1933)—a briskly cynical comedy, featuring a surprisingly vicious fistfight between Dick Powell and Lyle Talbot. After that Wellman went freelance for a time, directing Spencer Tracy in a comedy-drama about wiretapping, Looking for Trouble (1934), for Zanuck’s newly formed 20th Century Pictures, then Stingaree (1944) at RKO—a musical romance based on E. W. Hornung’s stories about an Australian Robin Hood. Looking for Trouble, appropriately enough, provided ample evidence of Wellman’s explosive temper—he and Tracy disliked each other on sight, and the two men twice had to be forcibly extracted from brawls.

Wellman spent much of his time at MGM feuding with studio head Louis B. Mayer and consequently was relegated to run-of-the-mill material….In 1937 Wellman asked to be released from his Metro contract and rejoined David O. Selznick at his new Selznick-International Pictures. Wellman professed a hatred of producers throughout his career, but he and Selznick worked very well together. Their first collaboration at Selznick-International was A Star Is Born (1937), scripted by Dorothy Parker, Alan Campbell, and Robert Carson from a story devised by Carson and Wellman. It draws on the real life tragedies of such fallen idols as John Gilbert and John Barrymore, tracing the rise to stardom of Vicki Lester (Janet Gaynor) as her alcoholic husband, Norman Maine (Frederic March), plummets from celebrity to obscurity, finally killing himself to save her career.

This often savage meditation on what lay behind the glamour and glitter of Hollywood was a smash hit. “For about the first time,” wrote Otis Ferguson, “the mechanics of the industry are worked in with thorough coverage….And all done with a sense of the actualhardness and fabulous confusion….W. Howard Greene received a special Oscar for his Technicolor photography, which avoided the garishness of most pioneer color movies, and Wellman and Carson shared another Academy Award for best original story….The immense success of A Star is Born and Nothing Sacred brought Wellman a contract with Paramount, where for five years he produced as well as directed his films. His first project there was a labor of love, Men With Wings (1938), tracing the growth of aviation through the melodramatic story of two pioneering aviators vaguely modeled on the Wright Brothers. Like most of Wellman’s flying films, this one is marred by its romantic subplot, which threatens to take over the movie. The best sequences recapture the excitement of the aerial work in Wings, with the addition of sound and color.

A much better film followed, a remake of Herbert Brenon’s 1926 adaptation of P. C. Wren’s novel of the French Foreign Legion, Beau Geste. Wellman assembled an impressive cast, with Gary Cooper, Ray Milland, and Robert Preston as the gallant Geste brothers and Brian Donlevy as the sadistic Sergeant Markoff. Wellman’s Beau Geste closely follows Brenon’s silent version and was filmed on the same location, in the desert near Yuma, Arizona.…

Walter Van Tilburg Clark’s 1940 novel The Ox-Bow Incident was a “serious Western,” using the genre as a backdrop for a poetic tragedy of intolerance and mob violence. Wellman fell in love with the book and bought the rights himself. He approached several studios, but the downbeat story—with little action and no romance—was deemed uncommercial. Finally, he made a deal with 20th Century-Fox, which agreed to finance the movie on condition that he direct a picture a year for the studio for five years—two of them to be chosen by Zanuck and directed by Wellman whether he liked them or not.

The Ox-Bow Incident is set in Nevada in 1885. The movie failed at the box office, as the industry cynics had predicted. Its critical reception, on the other hand, was enthusiastic. The Ox-Bow Incident was nominated for a best picture Oscar and was soon established as a classic of the genre. However, James Agee wrote that this, “one of the best and most interesting pictures I have seen for a long time,” was ultimately disappointing on account of its “stiff overconsciousness.” It seemed to him “a mosaic of over-appreciated effects which continually robbed nature of its own warmth and energy.”

For the first time since The Ox-Bow Incident, Wellman found a project with which he could involve himself personally and passionately. The Story of GI Joe (1945), based on the writings of war correspondent Ernie Pyle, was offered to him by the independent producer Lester Cowan. Wellman at first resisted, saying that he hated “the God-damned infantry,” but Cowan won him over, and the film was one of the best of his career.

The story of GI Joe offers an honest and humanistic view of the common infantryman as seen through the exploits and sufferings of one patrol. Burgess Meredith played Pyle, and Wellman took Robert Mitchum out of B-movies to play the patrol leader Lieutenant Walker—so powerfully that he was nominated for an Oscar as best supporting actor. “Final judgment must wait on time,” wrote Richard Griffith, “but I feel that Wellman’s film deserves to stand beside Three Soldiers, Brady’s Civil War photographs, and the pioneer work of Ambrose Bierce and Stephen Crane as one of the greatest documents of warfare.” James Agee called it “a tragic and eternal work of art.”

Wellman never again reached such heights, but the films he made over the following twelve years included some excellent work. Among his successes were two movies made in 1948 for 20th
Wellman died of leukemia at the age of seventy-nine, and as he requested, his ashes were scattered from the skies.

Like his friends John Ford, Victor Fleming, Raoul Walsh, and Howard Hawks, Wellman was a hard-nosed man’s man who refused to regard himself as anything so effete as an artist and insisted that his only aim was to entertain. He has often been compared to Hawks because of their similarity of subject matter and their shared preoccupation with groups of professionals in crisis situations. Unlike Hawks, however, Wellman would direct virtually anything that a studio handed him. “You make all kinds of things,” he said, “and that, I think, is what gives you the background to eventually make some very lucky picture.”

For nearly forty years, Wellman was regarded as one of the best directors in Hollywood. His reputation went into decline in the 1950s, and much of his best work was forgotten. You Never Know Women, Beggars of Life, Heroes for Sale, The President Vanishes, and The Robin Hood of El Dorado went unseen for years, until Wellman was rediscovered and championed by such critics as Kevin Brownlow, Richard Schickel, Gerald Peary, Frank Thompson, and Manny Farber.

Wellman prided himself on working fast, and along the way he made many poor films. At his best, as Richard Combs writes, he “has been compared, on the one hand, to Griffith for the simplicity and lyricism of his treatment of a social order and its outcasts...and, on the other, to Stroheim for an inclination toward symbolism, edging close to expressionism in some of the effects by which he attempts to give an entirely subjective cast to the action.” The unevenness of his work and its stylistic eclecticism has made it difficult for admirers to give an entirely subjective cast to the action. The unevenness of his work and its stylistic eclecticism has made it difficult for admirers to give an entirely subjective cast to the action. The unevenness of his work and its stylistic eclecticism has made it difficult for admirers to give an entirely subjective cast to the action.

By the time September 1926 rolled around, the Wings company had been a mainstay in the community [in San Antonio Texas] for a long time. After six months of pre-production, with the full support of the War Department and $16 million worth of government manpower and equipment, and a production budget of $2 million—the most expensive budget of all-time!—the Wings express blasted off from Paramount Studios and landed in San Antonio, Texas. Wellman later wrote,

“We stayed at the Saint Anthony Hotel and were there for nine months. I know that was the correct time because the elevator operators were girls and they all became pregnant. They were replaced by old men, and the company’s hunting grounds were barren. Victor Fleming was making The Rough Riders at the same time and was staying at the same hotel. San Antonio became the Armageddon of a magnificent sexual Donnybrook. The town was lousy with movie people, and if you think that contributes to a state of tranquility, you don’t know your motion picture ABCs. To recount all that happens when a company of well over two hundred are taken away from their homes and families, and dumped into a strange locale? It’s rough on the company and rough on the locale.

The fires that start burning are burning in every neighborhood in the country. The only difference being that we who lit the match are in the movies. We are monkeys in a weird cage. There is something unique about us, and only we know what it is. Maybe the closest to us is a doctor. His business is human beings, sick ones. Our business is the same, only our beings are not suffering, they are acting suffering or acting happiness, success or failure, excitement or boredom, life or death—everything that can happen to a human being, every thought they posses the actor echoes, the writer writes, the director directs, the cameraman photographs, and every other department has a share in.
Day in and day out, year after year, you are crying or you are laughing, you are tense or relaxed, your emotions are turned on and off like a spigot, and you must be careful not to become so callused that when the real thing happens it hasn’t been robbed of its vitality. A motion picture company lives hard and plays hard, and they better or they will all go nuts.”…

From the get-go, Wellman got along with the Air Corps and their officers; the Army was another matter. Wellman explained, “We had the army too, thousands of them, infantry, artillery, the works, and in command a general who had two monumental hatreds: fliers and movie people.

He met me, the director, and immediately disliked me. This has happened to me many times before, but never so quickly. I hardly drew a breath and I was in the doghouse, for three hatreds: I was an ex-flier turned motion-picture director and I was only twenty-nine years old, and apparently anybody under forty was to him ungrown. We had a couple of very hot vendettas, and I could get nowhere with the old boy until I reminded him that whether he liked it or not, he was working for Paramount Pictures and that I, despite my age, was the director of the Paramount picture called Wings and brought a copy of the orders from the War Department as a convincer. It convinced. The old boy was still in the army.

After two months of shooting, Wellman decided to throw away everything they had filmed. The flying scenes didn’t look real. Jesse Lasky later wrote, “The company entrained to Texas—and sat there. Wellman stubbornly refused to start shooting until there were clouds in the sky. There were days on end of perfect sunshine, and our $200-a-week director wouldn’t turn on a camera, while overhead mounted at thousands of dollars a day. I confess that we were about ready to yank him off the picture and replace him with someone who would be more amenable.”

Wellman wrote, “Say you can’t shoot a dogfight without clouds to a guy who doesn’t know anything about flying and he thinks you’re nuts. He’ll say, ‘Why can’t you?’ It’s unattractive. Number two, you get no sense of speed, because there’s nothing there that’s parallel. You need something solid behind the planes. The clouds give you that, but against a blue sky, it’s like a lot of goddam flies! And photographically, it’s terrible.”…

Since no aerial photography on or near this scale had been done previously, a new book would have to be written. Both hand-cranked and battery-run cameras were standard for the era. Cranking by hand was preferred because the operator could control the speed of the action by cranking slower or faster. The motorized camera filmed at the same speed.

During the early attempts at Wings photography, the operators tried to hand-hold and crank the cameras while flying alongside the picture planes. There was too much movement of camera and plane. Even bolting the camera down did not solve the problems.

Both the camera plane and picture plane moved in opposition to one another—the flimsy crafts vibrated, wobbled, and shook with the wind, moving backward and forward, up and down, and side to side, resulting in a shot that was unsteady, unclear, and uncomfortable to the eye of the audience.

E. Burton Steene saved the day! Wellman recalled, “Burton Steene was the number one aerial photographer of the 20s and I grabbed him for Wings, the luckiest grab I ever made. He had a camera with an Akeley head, which means it had gears, a pan handle and a frightening whine to it as Burton panned up or down or from side to side. For 1926, it was unbelievable and Burton was so expert at it, he shot ninety percent of all the air scenes in Wings.”

Because stunt pilots, not the actors, were flying the picture planes, the cameramen couldn’t get close or the cameras would identify them instead of Buddy Rogers and Richard Arlen. Therefore, no close-ups! Wellman tried shooting close-ups on the ground, faking the fact that they weren’t in the air, but it looked completely unreal.

Wellman himself took to the skies to view the complex problems. He and Harry Perry discussed all the possibilities and made a number of decisions:

*Camera mounts would be created and fastened or strapped to the fuselages of the planes.
*Platforms and up to one-hundred-foot towers would be constructed from the ground to photograph the low-flying aircraft and the ground warfare.
*Thirteen camera operators would film the aerial sequences.
*There would be no trickery in the filming of actors flying—Buddy Rogers and Richard Arlen would learn to fly. Motor-driven cameras would be mounted on the front of two-cockpit airplanes or behind the rear cockpit; once airborne, the safety pilot would duck down or hide behind a large headrest, and the actors would turn on the cameras and pilot the planes.

Arlen had some flying experience; Rogers, none. They were given the best flight instructors available, but only received a few hours’ training, Rogers remembered, “I was the photographer, the director, the actor, everything…for five hundred feet.” Arlen fared quite well with his flying, but Rogers, Wellman recalled, “was a tough son of a bitch. He hated flying, which made him deathly sick. He logged over ninety-eight hours in the picture and every time he came down, he vomited. That’s a man with guts. I love him.”

Paramount did not understand either the waste or Wellman’s passion for realism. They were also afraid that he was going to kill the stars.
COMING UP IN THE FALL 2012 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXV:

Sept 4 Fritz Lang 1931
Sept 11 The Four Feathers Zoltán Korda 1939
Sept 18 Children of Paradise Marcel Carné 1945
Oct 2 Kiss Me Deadly Robert Aldrich 1955
Oct 9 Lonely Are the Brave David Miller 1962
Oct 16 Fail-Safe Sidney Lumet 1964
Oct 23 The Stunt Man Richard Rush 1980
Oct 30 Come and See Elem Klimov 1985
Nov 6 Grave of the Fireflies Isao Takahata 1988
Nov 13 Magnolia Paul Thomas Anderson 1999
Nov 20 Russian Ark Alexander Sokurov 2002
Nov 27 White Material Claire Denis 2009
Dec 4 A Separation Asghar Farhadi 2011

CONTACTS:
...email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu
...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu
...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: http://buffalofilmseminars.com
...to subscribe to the weekly email informational notes, send an email to addto list@buffalofilmseminars.com
...for cast and crew info on any film: http://imdb.com/

The Buffalo Film Seminars are presented by the Market Arcade Film & Arts Center and State University of New York at Buffalo with support from the Robert and Patricia Colby Foundation and the Buffalo News