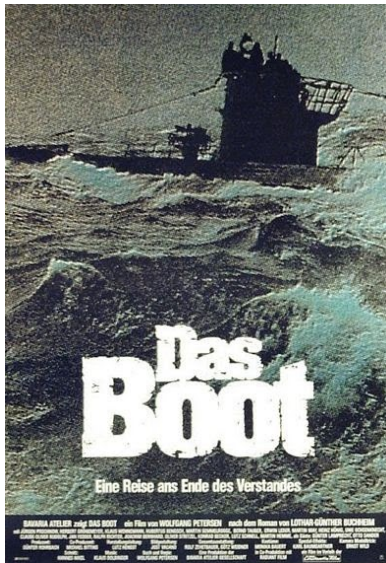


Travels of Mark Feine

(Ghost Written by RICH SMITH) Thursday, April 3, 2014

The 7 Best Submarine Movies Ever



In the course of penning my post a couple of weeks back about the Civil War-era submarine CSS Hunley, I discovered that Hollywood had filmed an action-adventure movie about that remarkable underwater vessel's attack on the Union sloop-of-war USS Housatonic.

"The Hunley" was a made-for-TV flick that starred Armand Assante in the role of Lt. George Dixon, skipper of the ill-fated sub. I didn't see this movie when it aired in 1999, but I do note that "The Hunley" is available on DVD. Maybe I'll purchase it and load it onto my phone for the next time I'm traveling to visit mesothelioma patients on behalf of [Weitz & Luxenberg](#). There's nothing worse than being stuck at an airport somewhere due to flight delays and not having anything good to pass the time with.

I couldn't help noticing while reading up on this film that "The Hunley" is considered one of the Top 20 all-time greatest submarine movies at the website [Ranker.com](#).

Ranker.com and other movie-buff sites are pretty much in agreement on what constitutes the best of the "silent service" genre, but there's little consensus as to the order in which those movies should be ranked.

As a former Navy submariner and current movie aficionado, I feel eminently qualified to put their choices in a proper order. Secure all hatches, because here we go:

7. **"20,000 Leagues Under the Sea"** (1954). Walt Disney Studios won a couple of Oscars for this adaptation of the 1870 Jules Verne sci-fi novel. It was shot in vivid Technicolor and was helped by a great cast that included James Mason and Kirk Douglas. The real star, though, was the Nautilus – a cool fantasy sub. Despite the plentiful swashbuckling in this movie, "20,000 Leagues" is wholesome fare perfect for family viewing (although very young children might be scared by the attack of the giant squid). Personally, I wouldn't have placed this movie in a "best of" list, but that's only for the reason that this movie didn't connect with me on a personal level (even though Kirk Douglas is one of my favorite actors). I'm just not all that into make-believe submarine adventure. I like my sub fare real and gritty, taut and chilling.

6. **“K-19: The Widowmaker”** (2002). When they call the K-19 a “widowmaker,” it’s not because the sub sends a lot of married enemy combatants to their graves. The deaths are all aboard the K-19, the Soviet Union’s first nuclear-powered sub (it leaks radiation like water through a sieve). This film can be painful to watch. Harrison Ford and Liam Neeson star.

5. **U-571** (2000). This year’s Oscar-winning “Best Actor” Matthew McConaughey is in charge of a boarding party from a U.S. sub dressed up to resemble a Nazi U-boat. The plan is to trick one of the actual wolfpackers to come alongside so they can capture it. The German boat that takes the bait is the U-571. McConaughey and team don’t so much want the U-571 as they do what she’s carrying – an Enigma machine, the highly classified device used by the Germans to encode and decode transmitted messages they wanted kept secret. Footnote: there really was a U-571 during World War II, but this movie is not based on historical events surrounding that boat.

4. **“Hunt for Red October”** (1990). Tom Clancy was in a league of his own when it came to writing international espionage novels, and “Hunt for Red October” was among his finest. Here, you’ve got Sean Connery playing the renegade captain of a stealth Soviet sub, Red October. His commanders back in the Kremlin soon realize he’s a madman and order the Soviet navy to seek and destroy his ship. They can’t catch Red October by themselves, so they ask us to help. We go, “Sure, no problem.” But we don’t actually want Red October sunk. We’re only playing along with the Soviets because what we really want is to get our hands on Red October so we can have an up-close look at its no-signature caterpillar drive technology. I like this film even though it contains some distracting technical flaws – for example, the idea of an inadvertent launch isn’t plausible, submarines don’t bank when they execute a turn, and they certainly can’t maneuver through underwater mountain ranges.

3. **“Down Periscope”** (1996). Inexplicably, this Kelsey Grammer comedy never made it to Ranker.com’s list (so I’m correcting the error for them by adding it to mine). Grammer plays a much passed-over executive officer forever longing for his first submarine command. His wish comes unhappily true when the Navy gives him a rusting, barely functioning World War II-era diesel-powered boat and designates him the mock enemy in a war game against a state-of-the-art U.S. nuclear-powered sub. To ensure Grammer loses, the brass saddles him with a crew of hopeless misfits. However, Grammer is himself a misfit who thinks like a pirate and uses his outside-the-box seamanship skills to great advantage. I like this film because Grammer’s character – although an exaggeration – depicts a type of submarine commander I idolized during my Navy career: someone cagey, inventive, and known for devil-may-care derring-do exploits.

2. **“Gray Lady Down”** (1978). Charlton Heston received top billing in this bottom-of-the-sea disaster vehicle that, like “Down Periscope,” never saw the light of Ranker.com’s list (even though movie-review site Rottentomatoes.com stamps it “fresh” with a 60% critic-approval rating). I was new to the sub force when this pic premiered in theaters, so it really made an impression on me. That’s why I’m taking the liberty here of adding it to Ranker.com’s big list and slotting it at No. 2. The plot finds Heston commanding the USS Neptune, which collides with a surface ship, sinks to just above crush-depth and comes to a rest teetering precariously on the rim of a deep undersea abyss. One nail-biting mishap after another further imperils the trapped crew while rescue is attempted. Besides Heston, “Gray Lady” featured a cast of terrific actors well-worth seeing perform together.

1. **“Das Boot”** (1981). For realism, you can’t beat this piece of fiction. It’s about Nazi submarine U-96. The story is told entirely from the point of view of the Germans. I first saw “Das Boot” years and years ago at a film festival in San Diego. The dialogue was entirely in German with English subtitles. But the scenes were so true to life that, for me anyway, the translation was unnecessary to understand what was going on. Confession (and spoiler alert): I felt bad when – after evading the relentless Allied hunter ships and somehow managing to limp back to port – the U-96 was destroyed anyway during an air-raid on its sub pen. Yes, the U-96 crew represented the bad guys in the war, so it might not be right to characterize them as heroic. But it is accurate and fair to say they had a lot of guts, which is typical of submariners regardless of nationality.

These are all great movies. I hope you’ll enjoy them as much as I do.