

H.M.S. Defiant

(US = "Damn the Defiant!")
 UK : 1962 : dir. Lewis Gilbert : Columbia / G.W. : 101 min
 prod: John Brabourne : scr: Nigel Kneale & Edmund H North : dir.ph.: Christopher Challis
David Robinson; [Robin Stewart; Ray Brooks; Peter Greenspan] †
 Alec Guinness; Dirk Bogarde; Anthony Quayle; Tom Bell; Nigel Stock; Murray Melvin;
 Victor Maddern; Maurice Denham; Walter Fitzgerald; Richard Carpenter

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω	8	€	M	♠	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
3860c	4.5	10	13	1,906	3	7	3	7	7	Yes	June 2001



† *David Robinson is one of at least three young midshipmen aboard the Defiant. The cast list identifies these three names under his own among the ship's officers:*

*Pardoe.....Robin Stewart
 Hayes.....Ray Brooks
 Johnson.....Peter Greenspan*

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide
 1996 review:

"Bogarde vs Guinness in stalwart tale of British warship during Napoleonic campaign. Production shows great attention to historical detail. Shot in CinemaScope. *** "

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review - identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

"Mutiny erupts on an 18th-century British sailing ship. Rather unpleasant and unenterprising sea fare reminiscent of the goings-on aboard the Bounty. Well enough staged and acted but not very remarkable or memorable. Scr: Nigel Kneale & Edmund H North from the novel "Mutiny" by Frank Tilsley. * "



"It authentically if superficially recreates the days of press gangs, maggots and the cat"

- Peter John Dyer

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

"The Defiant itself was rented from M.G.M, who had constructed it for the remake of "MUTINY ON THE BOUNTY". Once again it's the scene of conflict between captain and first mate but this time the former (Alec Guinness) is humane but ineffectual and the other (Dirk Bogarde) a sadistic disciplinarian. Among the crew muttering about mutiny are Anthony Quayle, Tom Bell and Murray Melvin. * "

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89 review:

"Commander of a fighting vessel faces the opposition of his second-in-command, a sadistic and cruel officer hated by the crew. Salty maritime costume drama with performances of a high standard, interest maintained throughout. *** "

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

"Super-patriotism on Nelson's high seas, from the novel "Mutiny" by Frank Tilsley; Alec Guinness, Dirk Bogarde, Anthony Quayle all more than adequate under Lewis Gilbert's direction. ** "

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"A distinguished cast of British actors take to the sea for a spectacular tale of a British ship sailing against Napoleon. Action and mutiny abound, and director Lewis Gilbert makes a splendid job of capturing the period atmosphere. Firm characterisations from a talented cast - Dirk Bogarde has a field day as the sadistic First Lieutenant - ensure engrossing and exciting entertainment. *** "

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

" "H.M.S. DEFIANT" is a strong naval drama about the days of the Napoleonic wars, enhanced by the strong appeal of Alec Guinness, Dirk Bogarde and Anthony Quayle.

Based on Frank Tilsley's novel, "Mutiny", story is of the time of old press gangs. British navy conditions were appalling and it was the mutiny depicted in this pic which did much to give the British naval men a new deal. Guinness plays the skipper of the Defiant which, when it sets out to help tackle the Napoleonic fleet, is ruptured by a tussle for power between Guinness and his first lieutenant (Bogarde).

Guinness is a humane man, though a stern disciplinarian. Bogarde is a sadist, anxious to jockey Guinness out of position. Below deck the crew, led by Quayle and Tom Bell, is plotting mutiny against the bad food, stinking living conditions and constant floggings ordered by Bogarde. Guinness' role does not give this actor scope for his fullest ability. Bogarde's is the more showy portrayal. Quayle makes an impressive appearance as the leader of the rebels, determined and tough, but realising that there is a right and a wrong way to stage a mutiny, like anything else."

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Authenticity is the hallmark of this sea saga of the Napoleonic period. This British production pits the commanding officer of a British warship against a hated second officer. The performances are superb. **** "

The Corporal Punishment Archive note:

"This 1962 British film, set aboard a warship during the Napoleonic Wars, features Alec Guinness as the captain and Dirk Bogarde as a sadistic officer. The vengeful Bogarde schemes to have the captain's son, a young midship-man, caned for various petty offences and even contrives for the captain to witness his son "kissing the gunner's daughter" (naval terminology for bending across a cannon to be beaten)."

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Time Out Film Guide" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]



It's all a long way from "DEATH IN VENICE". Malicious Dirk Bogarde undermines the authority of captain Alec Guinness by persecuting the captain's young son, David Robinson, and ensures the captain is on hand to see how he means to do it.

*This is only the first in a series of arbitrary hidings (off-camera) for the luckless midshipman. He won't be kissing **any** gunner's daughters when he gets back to shore.*

Source: The Movie & TV Spanking Page



Radio Times review:

“An entertaining adventure from Lewis Gilbert, who virtually told the same tale in **"SINK THE BISMARCK!"** This richly coloured romp benefits from the experienced playing of Dirk Bogarde, Alec Guinness and an underused Anthony Quayle, all of whom swash buckles in the Napoleonic wars. Bogarde, in particular, is splendid as a demented martinet. *** ”

“Historical adventure set during the Napoleonic Wars. A cruel lieutenant on board the H.M.S. Defiant challenges the captain's authority and increases the anger among the ship's already discontented crew. *** ”



A life on the ocean waves has a sting in the tail for young Harvey Crawford (David Robinson)

Source: The Movie & TV Spanking Page

For anyone with an interest in 18th Century naval history or seafaring tradition, there are scant few films which convey an authentic feel of the life aboard ship in those days, and none at all which are prepared to paint a graphic picture. Most filmed versions of **"TREASURE ISLAND"**, for example, like the book itself, are very thin on the colouring and detail of life at sea. Where did the crew sleep before the comparatively late introduction of the hammock? What were the toilet arrangements? What were the superstitions and bad-luck-averting customs among the sailors (a notoriously superstitious breed)? Such details make the essence of life under canvas more vivid. There was more to that life than clambering up rigging, the brutal floggings and manning the cannon, but one gets little sense of it from all the pirate movies and Napoleonic naval adventures, whereas 20th Century seafaring titles like **"CAPTAINS COURAGEOUS"** and **"DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS"** generally have more of a compelling salt tang to them, and so did **"MOBY DICK"**.

On that score, **"H.M.S. DEFIANT"** is at least better than most, in its passing glimpses of the lot of young midshipmen (seemingly aged 12-14) but, like various film accounts of the **"MUTINY ON THE BOUNTY"**, it is chiefly concerned with the social divisions and personality politics which lead to insurrection. People scurry about the decks, and clamber the rigging, and man the cannon, and there are floggings enough, but we penetrate no deeper into these floating masculine societies than that. The crew aboard the Defiant are press-ganged into service, forcibly abducted from the shore and conscripted into their nation's war with the French, and it might have been useful to emphasise this more in the dialogue – that these are not habitual seafaring men of long family tradition, but carters and farmhands and saddle-makers altogether out of their element.

Nub of the drama in this case is that detested young second officer Scott-Padget (Bogarde) is a martinet whose mother's affair with an unspecified prominent figure in the British establishment means that he is protected from on high. His previous two captains both lost their commands after crossing swords with him. Captain Crawford (Guinness) is soon to discover this, and determines that his own authority will *not* be undermined. Bogarde's response is subtle and well-calculated. Guinness has brought his own son Harvey Crawford (David Robinson) aboard as a novice midshipman, insisting of course that no special favour be shown to the boy. With offers of a word in the right place that may gain him promotion, Bogarde mandates the officer (Nigel Stock) tasked with the discipline of midshipmen aboard the Defiant to pay "special notice" to the behaviour of young Harvey.

The officer warms to his delegated task at once. Harvey is caned for carving his initials on a galley table (the officer watched Bogarde carving the initials himself as they discussed his future prospects), and Bogarde finds some slender pretext to bring the captain below decks where he can witness his son being thrashed. Harvey is beaten again *every day* for the following week, sometimes with other midshipmen, sometimes not, and Guinness is unable to intercede without provoking a court martial for Bogarde when they return to shore, a contest Bogarde's influence would ensure resulted in the loss of Guinness' command. However, after a full week of fierce canings, when Harvey nearly pitches from the rigging in his weakened state, and is rescued by crew foreman Anthony Quayle, Guinness capitulates to Bogarde to spare his son.

One of the newly-pressed crew members was a lawyer's clerk ashore, and his knowledge of the law inspires Quayle and the crew to raise a petition for fairer treatment. But rather than risk a mutiny at the cost of all their lives, Quayle counsels the crew to patience until a concerted uprising can be organised across the whole British fleet. For him, Bogarde is merely an extreme example of the iniquities endemic in naval life. Matters come to a head when the *Defiant* captures two French vessels, and Guinness is able to transfer his son to one of them out of the cane's way, but then is himself injured in a broadside exchange, so that Bogarde must assume command. Floggings of the crew resume with a vengeance, and a scuffle over maggot-infested bread in the galley provokes an uprising.

Quayle assumes command, and all the officers aboard are placed under close arrest, but when he learns from Guinness that aboard the captured French vessel had been an intelligence officer of Napoleon's, with plans for the imminent invasion of England, his patriotic duty supercedes other considerations, and he rejoins the fleet in time to save the British flagship from a French fire-ship, but has the good sense to die in the engagement. What becomes of Bogarde I will not say, but he does not later rise to become Lord of the Admiralty.

A fine cast of dependables ensures that "**H.M.S. DEFIANT**" retains its dignity throughout, even though the characters themselves are thinly drawn. Bogarde is a simple Flashman type, all menace and spite and smirking satisfaction, Guinness a "decent fellow" with some standards of humanity and grasp of psychology, Quayle a heart of oak who knows his place in the great scheme of things. From the archive's perspective, the film would have been a deal more interesting had the story been told more from the vantage point of Harvey, who was experiencing shipboard life for the first time. And if being caned on his bottom every day for a week seems a minor suffering against the six dozen lashes meted out at intervals to adult members of the crew, it does make the sufferings of the Tom Brown's and David Copperfield's seem mild by comparison.

For a comparable setting (1790) see "[MIDSHIPMAN EASY](#)" (35) with a young Hughie Green in the title role. Three years prior to this, [David Robinson](#)'s had been one of the *derrieres in danger* in the Jimmy Edwards farce "**BOTTOMS UP!**", but nothing else is known about him, nor the other cast members putatively identified as his fellow midshipmen.

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