

'Piece of Cake' TV miniseries (1988)

Review by George Arnold

øPiece of Cakeö is a British production that also was shown in the U.S. as part of the Public Broadcasting Systemø Masterpiece Theater. I saw it when it first aired in the States and thought it was terrific. Iøve finally seen it again and itø held up remarkably well.



øPiece of Cakeø is a six-episode feature about the adventures and misadventures of the fictional Hornet Squadron of the RAF in the early days of World War II. The story begins just as the war is starting and takes the squadron through its deployment to France from England, its long and eventful service through the Phony War, then follows the squadron from the fall of France and its redeployment back to southern England and on to the climax of the series ø and of the Battle of Britain.

The six episodes run 50+ minutes each, so it's an investment of time to watch the whole thing, but it's well worth it.

The main character is really the squadron itself -- not just a few individuals, but the group as a whole. Yes, certain individuals stand out more than others, but this is an ensemble cast. So much so that it's sometimes difficult to tell all of the characters apart and to keep them straight as the story proceeds.

The title, "Piece of Cake," comes from the old bit of slang meaning something easy to do. The phrase comes naturally to the pilots of Hornet Squadron early in the story, as they lead a glamorous and often enjoyable life, with plenty of good food and drink, during their early days in France. But, as the war draws closer and losses of and personal tragedies of start mounting up, "piece of cake" becomes an ever more ironic comment on the squadron's day-to-day existence.

The personal stories are the heart of the film, but it's the flying sequences that really get the heart pumping. Filmed in the late-1980s, the production made use of about six still-operational Spitfires from the time. The book upon which this mini-series was based had the squadron using the more common Hurricane fighters of the early war, but by 1988 few, if any, Hurricanes were still flying. Hence, the switch to Spitfires. It's a bit of dramatic license as well as a nod to the realities of producing "Piece of Cake" more than 40 years after the end of WWII.

Apparently, the combat sequences themselves used footage from the 1969 movie "Battle of Britain." The exploding aircraft in those sequences did have a familiar look from that movie, if memory serves. But the landings, takeoffs, formation flying and stunts that use the vintage Spitfires are a thrill to watch just for themselves. The pilots who flew those Spitfires for the filming were a talented bunch.

Years ago, when I looked for a copy of *Piece of Cake*, it was available on Amazon, but for a steep price. It's still available there at a more reasonable cost -- for purchase as well as streaming. But these days, public libraries have plenty of DVDs of older movies and TV shows freely available, and that's where I found the copy that I recently watched. I see that YouTube also has all six episodes available for free although the video quality is poor. The YouTube videos also have voice-over opening sequences, which help bring the viewer up to date since the last episode. Those voice-overs were missing from the DVDs I watched.

The YouTube videos also have closed-captioning available, while my DVDs lacked subtitles. I like sub-titles, especially when the characters are speaking in British accents that sometimes can be hard for us viewers here in the colonies to follow. Be warned, however, the YouTube closed captioning appears to be automatically generated and it provides some hilarious mis-renderings of the spoken words.

Minor problems aside, this is a first-rate production, with an engaging plot and spectacular flying scenes. Even the musical score, performed by the London Philharmonic, is appropriately soaring. Highly recommended.