"THE DOOMED BATTALION" (Universal, 1931; released 1932) Directed by Cyril Gardner and Luis Trenker, German version by Carl Hartl and Luis Trenker; scenario by Trenker, Hartl and Paul Perez; Camera, Sepp Allgeier and Charles Stumar; music, Giuseppe Becce; a Marcel Vandal-Charles DeLeo production; 8 reels
With Luis Trenker, Tala Birell, Victor Varconi, Gustav von Seyffertitz, Albert Conti, Herman Bing, Henry Armetta, Gibson Gowland, C.Henry Gordon

Following the enormous success of "The White Hell of Pitz Palu", Universal launched themselves into a whole series of German co-productions that can be loosely termed "mountain films", although the American names stand side by side with the mystical and symbolic qualities of the originals. "SOS Iceberg", "The Rebel" and "The Doomed Battalion" were all money-makers on their initial releases (and were reviewed well too), "The Doomed Battalion" making the New York Times' "Best 10 list for 1932" and in addition provided impressive stock footage for Universal features for years to come! (The German version of "The Doomed Battalion" also starred Trenker, but he was the only player common to both films. It was longer than the American one, and more austere; there was no comedy relief, much less footage devoted to the wife; the climbing sequences were more protracted, and the war scenes grimmer, with more shots of bodies in the snow for example. But other than for this slight "popularisation" to make it an adventure film rather than a war film, the Hollywood version was faithful to the original, and avoided reshaping the script or injecting the expected cliches into it). "The Doomed Battalion" has a more sober plot than others in the group, resembling some of the better Russian semi-fictional war films of the 40's; as for example "In the Rear of the Enemy". Such plot as there is, is another variant on one of Trenker's favorite sub-themes - two friends from opposite sides meet for the first time on a mountain, are united by their understanding of its mystique, are split by events that make them temporary enemies, and are then reunited on their beloved peak. Trenker had used this theme before, and would use it again in Korda's "The Challenge" (1939) dealing with the conquest of the Matterhorn. The secondary theme, of the defeated battalion, is an old favorite in war films too - remember Hawks' "The Road to Glory"? - but theme here is of less importance than mood and style. Pictorially it is splendid, the ski scenes magnificently shot.

----------- ten minute intermission -----------

"AIR MAIL" (Universal, 1932) Directed by John Ford; written by Lieut.-Commander Frank Wead and Dale van Every; Camera, Karl Freund; 8 rls

Stunt flying by Paul Kartz

"Air Mail" marked John Ford's first association with ex-Naval officer Frank Wead, one of the most prolific writers of aviation and service scenarios in the thirties, and himself the subject of the last John Ford-John Wayne film, "Wings of Eagles". Not a major Ford, "Air Mail" is one of his least known yet in many ways one of his most entertaining films, made at a time when he was turning out films (and good ones) as witness "Pilgrimage" in our next series) so prolifically at Fox that one wonders why and how he found the time to do this one at Universal. (He hadn't been at Universal since his Harry Carey days in the early 20's, not has he ever returned to Universal since; why the property wasn't handed to a Universal contract director like William Wyler or James Whale is something of a mystery). It's formula stuff perhaps, but Ford's various trademarks are visible throughout; moreover the dialogue is punchy and snappy, the performances uniformly good (it's a pleasure to see the two young ladies from "The Old Dark House" together again), and the camerawork (by Karl Freund) and the manipulation of exceptionally realistic miniatures, really quite fine. One sometimes wonders why these pioneering aerodromes were always constructed in locations that boasted a plethora of mountain peaks, electric pylons and constant fogs, causing more planes to crash than to tend safely through, but perhaps that's just dramatic license. A programmer, "Air Mail" is, like all such programmers, a thoroughly professional and vastly entertaining job that deserves more attention than we can give it in these notes, but hopefully we can remedy that in the comments prior to the screening, and the discussion period afterwards.

------ William K. Everson -----