Note: due to the extreme length of this program (four hours) we will be starting promptly at 8:00 p.m. without any introductory comments, and obviously too without time for a discussion period afterwards. We'll start our introductory session a little earlier next week, so that any questions about tonight's program can be handled then. As to why such a long program: "The Seas Beneath", while not a major Ford, is an extremely interesting one. Approval was won at the screening at London's National Film Theatre late last year, and the film has been in the public showing in at least 35 years. Its value to Ford scholars lies largely in its comparison with Ford's later works, of which "They Were Expendable" is the most appropriate - though also, inconveniently, the longest.


One of Ford's first service films, "The Seas Beneath" is basic source material for many characterisations, incidents and attitudes common to his later Naval films, including his ill-disguised glorification of the American Navy. Odd scenes were also to turn up later as stock footage in such diverse films as "The World Moves On" and "Submarine Patrol". Surprisingly fluid and relaxed for such an early talkie, it gains measurably from the freedom of extensive location shooting. Catalina Island, cunningly disguised, serves well as a Mediterranean seaport in "World War One", and the minimum use of studio sets combined with the generally underplayed performances (O'Brien is especially good) give it a naturalistic and at times almost casually documentary look. These seascapes and combat scenes are stunningly photographed by Joseph H. August ("William S. Hart's favorite cameramen in earlier days, and also the photographer of Ford's "They Were Expendable") and the film markedly dates only in the occasional stiffly overdone scenes of lower-ranks camaraderie, and especially in the later hysterically overacted work of the leading lady. In fact, Ford's own casual recollections of the film, as printed in recent book-interviews, seem colored by his intense dislike of the lady, one Harlan Lessing, a German-speaking actress primarily employed by Fox at that time in the German versions of such films as "The Big Trail". Her role is no more of an intrusion than that of most leading ladies in masculine war films, but her shrill voice and overemphasis in her highlight "dramatic" scenes are thrown into exaggerated relief by the underplaying of the rest of the cast.

Though a little old-fashioned due to its plot utilisation of vamp-spies, the film's theme of mutual respect between enemies interestingly pre-dates the much later Fox film of the 50's, "The Enemy Below" (directed by Dick Powell) with Robert Mitchum and Curt Jurgens as the opposing American and German captains. This print is the first struck from Fox's new preservation negative, and its initial unveiling provided the shock that the film's best and certainly most Fordian highlight - the sincere, honestly sentimental burial at sea by twilight - was missing. Incredibly, this episode was apparently never included in the American release prints. The studio vault copy shows the discovery of the officer's body, and then a dissolve to a typewritten report of the funeral, ruling out the possibility of the scene merely being missing from that print. Very fortunately, a working print exists from the original negative used for the foreign version - an incredible melange that is totally out of synchronisation, includes a musical score printed over the dialogue so that the film could be released abroad as essentially a silent, and with blinding flashes of white film every few feet to accommodate the insertion of foreign titles! Very fortuitously indeed, the funeral sequence was hardly affected by all these hazards: the musical score had been dropped so that the sailors' song could be used, only one title insert was planned, and the twilight covers up the lack of synchronisation. We were therefore able to cut this sequence into the print, and the jeer for the German title-slug and occasional areas of dead track are a small price to pay for the salvaging of such a lovely episode. One wonders however not only why this episode was removed for American audiences, but also one trembles for the reliability of critical apprecials or other American talks of the period, which may likewise have been doctored to cater to the generally non-sentimental trend of the time.
Although John Loder was to work in later Ford films (most notably "How Green Was My Valley") he was probably cast here on the basis of his fluency in German. Loder found himself very much in demand in this period, commuting back and forth between London, Germany and Hollywood, starring in the bilingual films then so much in vogue.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

"THEY WERE EXPENDABLE" (FOM, 1945) Produced and directed by John Ford. Associate Producer, Cliff Reid; Screenplay by Frank Wead, from the book by William L. White; Camera, Joseph August; Art Directors, Cedric Gibbons and Malcolm F. Brown; Music, Herbert Stothart; Editors, Frank E. Hull and Douglas Briggs; 2nd Unit Director, James C. Havens; Assistant Director, Edward O’Neal; 13 reels.

With John Wayne, Robert Montgomery, Donna Reed, Jack Holt, Ward Bond, Louis Jean Heydt, Marshall Thompson, Cameron Mitchell, Russell Simpson, Leon Ames, Paul Langton, Arthur Walsh, Donald Curtis, Jeff York, Murray Alper, Harry Tenbrook, Jack Pennick, Tom Tyler, Charles Trowbridge, Robert Barrat, Bruce Kellogg, Tim Kuroda, Vernon Steele, Alex Havier. (c Wallace Ford, listed in many casts, was cut from the film before release).

Ford's famous epic of defeat was his first theatrical film since 1941's "How Green 'Is My Valley", the interim war years having been spent in the Navy as the Chief of the Field Photographic Branch, an O. S. S. unit. With a number of Hollywood associations including one with Ford, he produced training and propaganda films, recorded combat footage, and was responsible for the Academy-Award winning "The Battle of Midway". "They Were Expendable" was an odd film indeed to make at the close of a war. Its sadness and melancholy hardly matched the jubilation of the period, it had little propagandist value, and yet it was still too soon for it to have real perspective on the late war -- though it certainly had more than many of the similar films ("Wake Island" etc.) made during the war. If it was a Naval man's write-up to the "expendable" heroes of the days of defeat, it was certainly a sincere and soberly made one, and perhaps a necessary reminder, but it was a tribute that had already been paid - albeit less effectively - in such earlier films as Tay Garnett's "Bataan". Nevertheless it was not only one of the best of the war films, but in many ways one of Ford's own best films. Under-rated and seldom revived, it has probably been quite unfairly shunted into the standardised "John Wayne war epic" category along with "Beau to Bataan", "Flying Leathernecks", "The Fighting Seabees" and all the others.

Ford made the film as a kind of labor of love, donating his salary to build a recreation centre for the men of his old unit, and also as a tribute to his wartime comrade, John Buckley - renamed Brickley in the film, and played by Robert Montgomery. (In view of the fact that Buckley's wartime record matched the traditional Wayne screen image - he was also the man who installed his own water system when Castro cut the water supply to the U.S. base in Guantanamo - it is a measure of Ford's restraint that the role was played by Montgomery and not Wayne!) It's a contradictory film in many ways, certainly the professional Navy man's view, with Ford as usual treating the enlisted man as representing the bottom of the caste-system, and using him for low if affectionate comedy. There's no glamorising of war or side-stepping of the bitterness of defeat -- yet there is a kind of glorification (perhaps accurate, yet in context over-emphasised) of the exhilaration that war can bring at those moments when unity, comradeship, a just cause and lucky breaks coincide to make things go right. The two major torpedo-run sequences are staged almost like seagoing equivalents of a Ford cavalry charge over the screen, photography and excellent 2nd-unit staging coming to create memories of images - attack, hell-fire, flying flags - which are literally filmic translations of the battle paintings that were so common during the war. They are heroic, inspiring, exciting. Ford was there and I wasn't, but one can still question the validity of such scenes (factually, not cinematically) when romanticism tends to dominate realism. In fact, throughout the film, despite its considerable documentary values, there is a kind of dated romantic quality. Even the underplayed romance between John Wayne and a nurse is handled rather like a Ford cavalry story with the self-sacrificing wounded elements of the Pioneers as a serenade-providing group. One does question whether wartime romance under fire and pressure would have been quite so gentlemanly, but obviously Ford sincerely believed, or at least hoping, that it was.

The film in any case, even in these days when war films are generally looked on with suspicion if not contempt, works beautifully within the structure that Ford gives it. Scenes that should by all normal standards be mawkish and contrived - the officer's death in the hospital, the eager-beaver asking Jack Arthur to autograph his cap, even Russell Simpson's defiance of the Japanese to the swelling strains of "Red River Valley" - all come off as highlights rather than cliches. --- Wm. K. Everson