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VARIETY

The Trial of Sergeant Rutledge (COLOR-SONG)

Race - bias angle added to strong John Ford melodrama, needs selling.

Hollywood, April 4.

Warner Bros. release of John Ford (Willis Goldbeck & Patrick Ford) production. Stars Jeffrey Hunter, Constance Towers, Billie Burke. Directed by John Ford. Screenplay, James Warner Bellah and Willis Goldbeck; camera, Bert Glennon; editor, Jack Murray; music, Howard Jackson; song, "Captain Buffalo," Mack David and Jerry Livingston. Previewed at Warner Bros. studio, April 4, '60. Running time, 111 MINS.

Lieut. Cantrell.....	Jeffrey Hunter
Mary Beecher	Constance Towers
Mrs. Fosgate	Billie Burke
Braxton Rutledge	Woody Strode
Skidmore	Juano Hernandez
Major Fosgate	Willis Bouchey
Captain Shattuck	Carleton Young
Lieut. Mulqueen	Judson Pratt
Captain Dwyer	Bill Henry
Captain MacAfee	Walter Reed
Captain Dickinson.....	Chuck Hayward
Nellie	Mae Marsh
Chandler Hubble	Fred Libby
Dr. Eckner	Charles Seel
Lucy Dabney	Toby Richards

Give John Ford a troop of cavalry, some hostile Indians, a wisp of story and chances are the director will come galloping home with an exciting film. In Warner Bros.' "Sergeant Rutledge," writers James Warner Bellah and Willis Goldbeck (latter also co-produced with Patrick Ford) provided an extra plus factor in the form of an offbeat and dramatically intriguing screenplay which deals frankly, if not too deeply, with racial prejudice in the post-Civil War era. Director Ford expertly blends the action-pictorial and the story elements to create lively physical excitement as well as sustained suspense about the fate of a Negro trooper who is accused of rape and double murder.

Original tag on this picture was "Captain Buffalo." With a serviceable song using that title composed by Mack David and Jerry Livingston it is questionable that the new label represents any improvement from the standpoint of exploitation. It will take aggressive selling to assure this film the kind of audience it deserves since there are no so-called big marquee names in the cast. However, the script offers plenty of opportunities for stimulating interest among virtually all types of audiences, excepting the young who should not be exposed to the sordid rape denouement.

While star billing goes to Jeffrey Hunter, Constance Towers and Billie Burke, it's actually Woody Strode who dominates. As the giant-sized Negro 1st sgt. who is eventually proven to be a victim of circumstantial evidence, Strode gives an unusually versatile performance. Ford uses his camera to accent the actor's natural physical strength, to build an image of a man of action and heroic proportions while Strode fills out the design with many subtle shadings of character.

The screenplay is said to have a historical basis in that the U.S. 9th

and 10th Cavalry of Negro troopers, commanded by white officers, fought skirmishes with the Apaches in Arizona after the Civil War. Whether the actual incident which forms the plot structure—the murder of the Commanding Officer of the 9th Cavalry and the rape-murder of his daughter—also is factual is not quite as important as that it plays well. Story unfolds via a series of flashbacks from the court martial of Strode as witnesses describe his friendship with the dead white girl, his panicky desertion, the circumstances of his capture by the Lieutenant (Hunter) who later volunteers as defense counsel.

Most of the action flows out of the testimony of Miss Towers, the only sympathetic witness, whom Strode has saved from an Indian ambush. Ford makes strikingly effective use of a stage technique by gradually blacking out the screen so that only the figure of Miss Towers remains in the camera eye as her words fade into actions. When the picture is not pounding along as an Indian war party ravages the countryside, Ford sees to it that the court martial progresses with mounting suspense, tempered with a few touches of broad comedy. These are provided chiefly by Miss Burke as the gabby, but outwardly prim wife of the president of the court; Willis Bouchey as her annoyed and embarrassed spouse, and Judson Pratt as a member of the trial board.

Carleton Young has several opportunities for bravura acting as the cruelly vindictive prosecuting attorney and plays them to the hilt, revealing a forcefulness that this reviewer, at least, had not previously suspected. Hunter's role is more subdued, but he does a commendable job both in the role of attorney and soldier on horseback. Miss Towers is easy to look upon and performs with easy grace what is required of her. Juano

Hernandez brings quiet dignity to his part as an aged trooper who was born slave and has no idea how old he actually is.

While the climax of the story has a distinctly melodramatic flourish, it carries considerable force. The scenarists and Ford apparently were striving for shock effect—and they have it. Although the revelation that the rape and murders were committed by the lusty father of a boy the girl knew takes "Sergeant Rutledge" out of the category of recommendable family entertainment, it is handled in good taste for adult viewing. Fred Libby, as the degenerate attacker, is required to display considerable emotion when he is exposed, but Ford permits him to chew the scenery with too much relish for comfort.

Technical credits, including editing by Jack Murray, sound by M. A. Merrick, are all good and Bert Glennon has used his color camera expertly to capture the majestic natural scenic values of Monument Valley, which always manages to look new and fresh and exciting in a John Ford picture.

Pyro.