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Author(s)	Michael Goodwin
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WORLD WAR II FILM FESTIVAL (Program #1)

THEY WERE EXPENDABLE

John Ford's masterwork, *THEY WERE EXPENDABLE*, was shot while he was still a Lt-Commander in the USNR; it tells the heroic tale of the men who manned the little torpedo boats during the desperate days when the war was going very badly for US forces in the Philippines. Written for the screen by Service tragedian Frank "Spig" Wead, *THEY WERE EXPENDABLE* is one of Ford's most powerful and rewarding pictures. Long, slow-paced and understated, its cumulative effect is simply stunning. The battle sequences are the most pyrotechnic ever made, more like dreams of combat than actual firefights, but the film's best moments lie between the battles: a woman singing "My Country Tis of Thee" in a nightclub as the squadron, just having heard about Pearl Harbor, files out in horror; the brief romance between John Wayne and Donna Reed, ended by a broken phone connection as final as death; Robert Montgomery's farewell to his doomed squadron, "You older men...take care of the kids." As James Agee noted at the time, "For what seems at least half of the length of *THEY WERE EXPENDABLE*, all you have to watch is men getting on or off PT boats, and other men watching them do so. But this is made so beautiful and so real that I could not feel one foot of film was being wasted." Ostensibly about defeat, *THEY WERE EXPENDABLE* is really about victory--the victory of discipline, courage, character. --Michael Goodwin

Directed by John Ford. Produced by John Ford. Screenplay by Frank W. Wead, from book by William L. White. Photography by Joseph H. August. Second-unit director James C. Havens. Rear-projection plates by Robert Montgomery. With: John Wayne, Robert Montgomery, Donna Reed, Jack Holt, Ward Bond. (1945, 136 mins.)