

SERGEANT RUTLEDGE
(1960, 111 Minutes)

In the period after the Civil War, the U.S. Army contained 10 regiments of cavalry. Two of these, the 9th and the 10th, were composed of black enlisted men (mostly ex-slaves) serving under white officers. Since only seven of the ten cavalry regiments served in the West, nearly 30 percent of the “fighting” frontier cavalry was black. Two black infantry regiments (24th and 25th Infantry) also served in the West, primarily escorting wagon trains and stagecoaches, building roads and telegraph lines, and guarding supply lines. All the black regiments operated under intense disadvantages: lack of quality officers, poor equipment, worn out horses, difficult assignments, and indifference and hostility by the War Department and the Commanding General of the Army. The cavalry regiments had the highest reenlistment rates and lowest desertion rates of any regiments on the frontier. They served primarily in the Southwest, where they faced intense racism and antipathy from white settlers and the white Army and the Texas Rangers alike. Their fighting record against Native Americans and bandits, guarding stagecoaches, and pursuing outlaws was unequalled. They fought white prejudice and racism and did not back down in the face of injustice and insults.

In its traditional portrayal of the frontier army in numerous films, Hollywood presented a picture of a nearly all-white military defending other white Americans against Native American “savages” and other undesirables. A rare exception to this pattern was *Sergeant Rutledge*, directed by John Ford in 1960. Ford’s films across the decades had dealt obsessively with themes of race, ideology and class. In the period after World War II, his frequent retreat to Monument Valley and western films focusing on the myths of the American west could not conceal the

social commentary in his films. Based on a novel by one of Ford's favorite Western writers, James Warner Bellah, *Sergeant Rutledge* is a thought -provoking film about racial injustice, the less than equal treatment of black troops, and a form of atonement for racial stereotyping in some of Ford's earlier films. The fear of black sexuality in American life permeates the film, as does white American society's hostility toward and cultural domination of other groups.

The overall plot is simple enough: a long serving black cavalryman is accused of the murder of his white commanding officer and the rape and murder of his young daughter. The film plays out with courtroom scenes juxtaposed against beautiful scenes in the vastness of Monument Valley and the pursuit of renegade Apaches. Flashback sequences with stirring bursts of cavalry action as Rutledge's record is evoked in his trial defense are technically accurate and moving. The dialogue contains some memorable lines atypical of the bland Hollywood treatment of race in the 1950s. Blacks were cast as real actors, not mere chauffeurs or handymen. The actor Woody Strode later said that his impassioned courtroom speech "still gives me goosebumps" over thirty years later! In the end, there is an unintended irony as Rutledge demonstrates epic status at the expense of Native Americans. And his vindication as an individual does little to change the military institution and American society that he serves.

Technically, *Sergeant Rutledge* was not one of Ford's better films, although the color contrasts and angle shots are outstanding. Its scenes are jumbled and the plot does not flow smoothly. But Ford had sufficient prestige in Hollywood in the

later stages of his career that he could address controversial issues without fear of commercial failure.