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Marine Sergeant James O'Hearn is being tried at the San Diego Marine base for desertion, theft, scandalous conduct and destruction of property in time of war. He refuses to testify or plead guilty or not guilty to the charges. Showgirl Ginger Martin takes the stand against his protest. She testifies O'Hearn won't talk because he is protecting the name of his pal, Marine Private Davey White. Ginger tells how she, broke and stranded, met the two marines in Shanghai two weeks before Pearl Harbor. White proposes marriage so that Ginger can be evacuated from China as his wife. Before the ceremony, the two Marines get into a fight with the natives and escape with Ginger aboard a small motor boat. They wind up in Namou, a Vichy French island, and are quartered in a run-down hotel. O'Hearn discovers a Nazi yacht delivering radar supplies to the island, and plans to seize it with the help of the Free French. White refuses to join and says he is deserting and intends to remain on the island with Ginger, who calls him a coward. O'Hearn forces White on board the commandeered vessel bound for Guadalcanal. AWOL marine Sgt. Jim O'Hearn is court-martialed for a variety of offenses that carry 143 years in the stockade or the death penalty but refuses to aid in his own defense. Sergeant James O'Hearn is standing on trial for a number of serious misdemeanours, refusing to testify or even state his defence, the outlook is very bleak. Much against his wishes, good time girl Ginger Martin takes to the stand and the whole case against O'Hearn is going to be seen in a very different light. A tale of loves, friendships, rivalry's, bad luck, but most of all, heroism in the line of duty.

The genre police have tagged this picture as an action/comedy/romance set just prior to the Pacific hostilities in WWII. That it's a multi genre piece is a given, that it's also an odd bit of cinema is also very much understandable. That's the only real complaint with *South Sea Woman*, it's so jaunty and full of fun that when we get to the wonderful, bold and tough last quarter, you are not exactly sure how to feel. It's like entering a fancy dress party and winning first prize but then suddenly being told the prize is for worst costume of the night!

Anyway, the cast seem to be having a right laugh with it, Burt Lancaster (O'Hearn) and Chuck Connors (Davey White) are constantly at loggerheads about their participation in the conflict, and the direction they should be taking (humouressly so), because right in between them is Virginia Mayo (Ginger), sparkingly pretty she's all set to marry White, but O'Hearn is doing his hardest to ensure that that doesn't happen. This is the mainstay of the film, we (they) lurch from one fight to another, from one daft encounter to the next, bad luck and sheer bravado constantly zipping around with our protagonists, and then the shift to full blown drama. It ties up all the loose ends, and it in no way is a cop out ending, in fact far from it, but it does take some getting used to and even some time after the credits have rolled I personally was a bit bemused.

It's a recommended film, if only for the sparky cast it is worth it, but just go into it expecting a whisk in the blender and you will be OK. 6/10 In 1944 U.S. Marine Master Gunnery Sergeant James O'Hearn is facing a court martial for desertion, theft, scandalous conduct and destruction of property, charges which in time of war carry the death penalty. ("Scandalous conduct" in this context means sex outside marriage; if that were to be regarded as a capital offence under military law I suspect that the fighting strength of most of the world's armies would be drastically reduced overnight).

The above might suggest that this is a serious courtroom drama along the lines of "The Caine Mutiny". Admittedly, the film starts off in serious vein, but as soon as Ginger Martin (she with whom O'Hearn allegedly conducted himself scandalously) takes the stand seriousness goes out of the window and it descends into ridiculous comedy.

Ginger is presumably the "South Sea Woman" of the title, but she is actually a white American rather than a Polynesian and only finds herself in the South Seas by chance. When O'Hearn first meets her she is working as a showgirl at a nightclub in Shanghai, where his regiment is stationed, and is the girlfriend of his friend Private Davy White. An attempt by White to slip away to marry Ginger leads to the three finding themselves adrift at sea on a small motor boat. In a series of increasingly farcical misadventures, in the course of which they inadvertently commit the acts which will form the basis of the charges against O'Hearn, they are rescued by a Chinese junk and eventually cast away on the

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French-ruled island of Namou. As the Governor of Namou is pro-Vichy, and as the attack on Pearl Harbor has now brought America into the war, the two Marines have to pretend to be deserters in order to avoid being interned. White and Ginger attempt to marry several times, but are always frustrated.

It is at this point that the film changes direction again, largely abandoning comedy and turning into a patriotic wartime adventure as O'Hearn and White discover a fiendish Nazi plot and decide to take action to thwart it, to seize a boat and to rejoin the Marines who are fighting the Japanese at Guadalcanal.

Mixing genres in this way is often a risky business, the risk being that the resulting film can end up as neither fish nor flesh nor fowl nor good red herring, or in this case neither drama nor comedy nor action. I don't think there was ever any possibility of this film being a sort of "Caine Mutiny Court Martial", but it could certainly have been made either as a comedy about the adventures of a pair of bungling Marines and a girl or as a standard gung-ho action war film about two heroic Marines with a sub-plot about their love-interest.

The attempt to make the film as a combination of these two approaches simply results in a misbegotten dog's breakfast, a film which is not very amusing when it tries to be a comedy and not very exciting when it tries to be a wartime adventure. About all one can say for it is that Virginia Mayo looks lovely, as she normally did.

This is not quite Burt Lancaster's worst movie; he normally saved his worst for those occasions, mostly in the sixties and seventies, when he allowed his political judgement to overcome his artistic judgement and ended up playing a villainous right-wing fanatic in turgid, paranoid left-wing thrillers like "Executive Action" or "The Cassandra Crossing". It is not, however, one of his better ones, and is one that is probably best forgotten by all but the most obsessive Lancaster fans. 4/10 a5c7b9f00b

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