

'Masters of the Air' doesn't soar as high as its predecessors

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: <<

out of <<<<<

Running Time: 60 minutes per episode (roughly)

The first two episodes of this nine-part Apple TV+ limited series debuts on Friday, Jan. 26, with a new chapter arriving each week thereafter.

Those up on their World War II history will recognize the 100th Bomb Group or "Bloody" 100th Bomb Group as a group of American pilots stationed near Norfolk, England who flew some of the most dangerous bombing missions during the lengthy conflict. Their story earned the attention of

Band of Brothers

and

The Pacific

executive producers Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg, who have now produced a new series based on the team's exploits.

Masters of the Air

is well-produced and certainly has a few interesting insights, but the first two segments also suffer from unexpected issues that prevent it from soaring as high as its predecessors.

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The opening scene of the first episode introduces viewers to friends Major Gale "Buck" Cleven (Austin Butler) and the louder, more arrogant Major John "Bucky" Egan (Callum Turner) shortly before they are set to leave the U.S. and join the 100th Bomb Group.

Cleven arrives a couple of weeks after Egan and is immediately surprised by what he experiences. Their daytime missions are seemingly impossible, taking on constant fire and regularly losing members. These young men are forced to grow up quickly and deal with the psychological toll of the missions and the alarming survival rate. The first two episodes show the team familiarizing themselves with each other and the aircrafts, as well as coming into contact with Nazi forces.

Early on, there are some interesting details about flying, as well as the men and their jobs. This includes a dangerous landing at a base in Greenland. One of the featured navigators named Lt. Harry Crosby (Anthony Boyle) is depicted as suffering from air sickness, which leads to some moments of levity. That is fine, but after two hours only Crosby, Cleven, Egan and pilot Lt. Curtis Biddick (Barry Keoghan) make a big impression. Otherwise, the supporting cast are only known for an individual tick or a nickname. Their development may grow as the series progresses, but it stood out as problematic during the first pair of episodes.

One intriguing detail is that, due to the danger involved in their missions, the group is also allowed to be as rambunctious as they like. This leads the brasher Egan to engage in eccentric and aggressive activities in order to let off some steam, priming the show for some more conflict within ranks in future episodes. And as for the bombing raids, the show is successful in detailing the harrowing damage that the aircrafts take, with shards of steel being hurtled through cabins and those onboard being exposed to extreme temperatures at great heights.

But while there are moments of insight, there are major issues with other aspects of the sequences. Obviously, a show set in the skies requires the use of extensive computer-generated effects. Most are excellent, but a few stylized moments have the feel of a video game rather than an authentic flying experience.

The biggest problem is actually the result of the show's attempts to be historically accurate. While at extreme altitudes, all the characters wear large oxygen masks and it's impossible to see much more than their eyes. Lead Cleven and a few more are initially identifiable. But as the

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editing jumps from plane to plane and character to character taking fire, it all becomes increasingly difficult to follow.

By the climaxes of these missions, the overall reaction isn't terror or fear, but literal confusion as to what happened to whom. Certainly, war is chaotic, but the inability to pick out individuals in an action sequence hurts these episodes tremendously.

The performers are all good and there are a few unique observations about flying missions during World War II. Sadly, not all of the characters stand out and the epic battles are as frustrating and confusing as they are dynamic. Things may certainly improve in the next chapters, but so far *Masters of the Air* doesn't reach the heights it needs to for a complete success.

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