

‘Hacksaw Ridge’ mixes melodrama and brutality

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: ««« out of 4 stars

Running Time: 139 min.

It's been umm, awhile since we've seen a high-profile Mel Gibson picture. His latest marks the first time the star has returned behind the camera as director in 10 years (his last stint was on the impressively gonzo Mayan tribe movie, *Apocalypto*).

Hacksaw Ridge is a true story that seems like a perfect fit with previous titles in the moviemaker's catalog. It's an epic tale of a man of conscience, who must defend his devout personal beliefs by enduring both physical and psychological torment.

And, yes, some of that torment is depicted in incredibly graphic fashion. So much so that it will undoubtedly turn off many viewers, or even leave some with a strange feeling about the entire enterprise. At least, that was my reaction to it.

It's certainly well made and effective overall. Still, it does suffer somewhat from an uneven tone that mixes the blood-soaked horror and brutality of war with old-fashioned melodrama and true love.

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As the United States enters WWII, a small-town resident Desmond Doss (Andrew Garfield) feels compelled to do his part. However, his personal beliefs add complications to enlisting.

As a Seventh Day Adventist, our protagonist won't use or even pick up any sort of weapon. Doss insists that he can work as a medic, but this doesn't sit well with Army Sergeant Howell (Vince Vaughn) or Captain Glover (Sam Worthington), who consider it insubordination. They decide to make the young man's training unbearable in the hopes that he will quit, even turning other members of his unit against him.

Garfield does a tremendous job here and pretty much saves the movie as the extremely likeable lead. A character like this could have come across as sanctimonious. However, his humble demeanor and stoic pacifism never read as a man behaving in a superior manner. He's an affable southern boy with a sense of humor who simply won't allow his beliefs to be compromised.

Some of the other casting is, well, a bit more unusual. Vaughn is an eccentric pick as a hard-nosed sergeant. He's fine overall, but he doesn't immediately exude authority.

Additionally, the family drama is oddly rendered. Doss's alcoholic dad Tom (Hugo Weaving) is eventually redeemed, but he does a lot of grandiose snarling and barking early on. These, as well as the lead's interactions with girlfriend Dorothy (Teresa Palmer) are generally presented in a larger-than-life manner (with a booming score).

Early moments resemble a very old-fashioned Hollywood flick, completely different from the brutal and disturbing second half.

Simply put, the attack is a bloodbath, with characters literally being blown and ripped to pieces. It's effectively rendered, although the raid does veer away too much from the central character. Obviously, it's to show viewers the brutality of war and what is occurring to various members in the military unit. Still, at times the camera seems to linger on random soldiers and bloody carnage.

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The movie really seems focused on suffering; Doss may be of a different religious persuasion, but even he ends up enduring a sort of rope-burn stigmata over the course of events.

This is a story of hope, based on the actions of a lone man saving lives in battle and staying behind to pull more injured parties back long after the retreat. Those are inspirational and the movie's strongest and most tension-filled moments.

One wishes that the battle itself had been shown more from Doss's perspective. Instead, we're distracted from his experience by cuts to other (and sometimes completely random) individuals.

At least the cliff face and battlefield environment is unique. And while I'm not entirely sure that all of the flying torsos and body parts are necessary, Gibson is great at organizing these battle sequences in a clear manner. There are a dozen characters involved in smoky raids running around in gunfire. The geography of the environment is always unambiguous, as are the various characters (all in uniform) onscreen at a particular time.

These types of scenes can quickly become a jumble, but this director is very adept at keeping the chaos comprehensible throughout.

Hacksaw Ridge is certainly an inspirational tale of one man's efforts to help a cause while maintaining his own ideology. Yet it's not without imperfections, jumping between the grandiose and graphically realistic. In the end, it's a decent war picture, but one that doesn't quite mix all of its elements as spotlessly as it could.

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