

Redemption at Hacksaw Ridge

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At a time in which we see horrific images of atrocities committed in the name of religion, the new film, “Hacksaw Ridge,” provides us with a different story. It is about a young man who, because of his faith, refuses to kill and commit atrocities. “Hacksaw Ridge” is director Mel Gibson’s new biopic film that tells the story of Pfc. Desmond Doss who became the first person to win the Congressional Medal of Honor without firing a single shot and without even holding a gun.

Doss, a Seventh-day Adventist, is a conscientious objector during World War II who enlists because he believes it is his patriotic duty. However, rather than enlist as a soldier, his plan is to enlist and serve as a medic so he can save lives rather than take them. While his plan seems simple and straightforward, Doss faces two clear obstacles. One, to serve as a medic, he has to pass basic training, which requires handling a rifle. Second, he has to survive basic training with the intense attitudes and feelings of the other soldiers and commanding officers who simply do not understand someone willing to enlist but not willing to kill the enemy during war.



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After Pearl Harbor, many young men were filled with rage and extreme patriotism. As we are introduced to Doss’ fellow soldiers, we see young men eager to respond to the threat posed by Japan and Germany, men eager to prove themselves in battle. It is this type of bravado that makes it hard for soldiers to understand or respect anyone who doesn’t feel the same way. As Gibson’s film makes clear, at a time when many Americans wanted revenge for that fateful day in December 1941, it was hard to believe that an able-bodied American did not want to fight and show the world that he was a true patriotic American.

Through the first half of the film, Doss’ constant battles for acceptance among his fellow soldiers are interspersed with flashbacks that give insight into how a simple young man from the Blue Ridge mountains of Virginia became a conscientious objector.

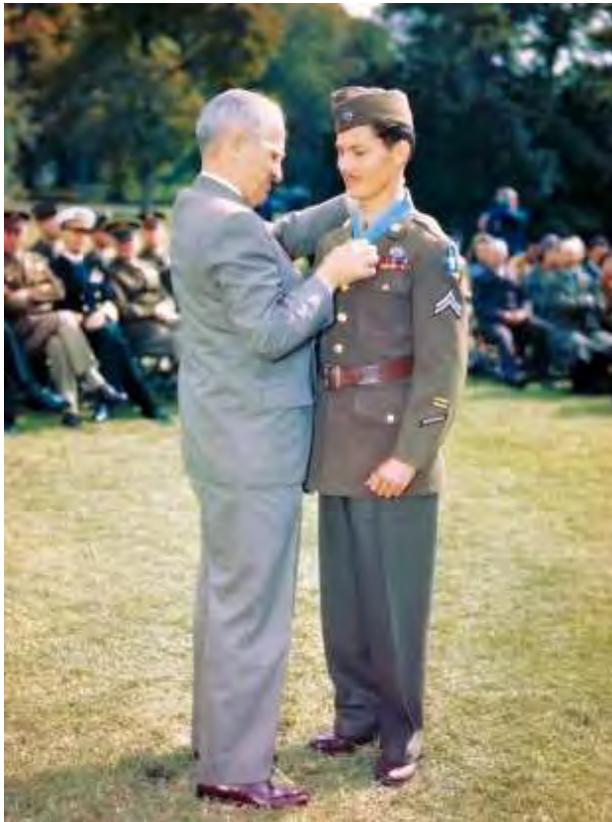
We see a young man haunted by memories of a father suffering from PTSD because of his experience in World War I. Having returned a broken man who visits the graves of his best friends who died in that war, Tom Doss, played powerfully by Hugo Weaving, turns to alcohol. He becomes a violent father and husband who is haunted by his memories while also trying to hold onto his faith. It is in such a home that young Desmond comes to define his convictions and faith. So when war breaks out and his friends begin to enlist – including his own brother who joins the Navy – Desmond realizes he can do no less. But he vows he will do so as a conscientious objector.

The film does an effective job of showing how Doss’ faith is put to the test throughout his training. Despite being beaten, called a coward, being ostracized, and ultimately court martialed, Doss does not waiver from his conviction that God was asking him to save lives, not take them. As he poignantly tells the judge during his court martial, with so much killing going on, what is wrong with wanting to “restore a little bit of humanity” in the midst of all that killing? When facing years in prison, it was Doss’ father who comes through for him resulting in the judge telling Doss he is “free to go into battle without a gun” thus allowing him to join his men as a medic in Okinawa and the infamous battle for Hacksaw Ridge – where thousands of men died.

Andrew Garfield’s performance as Doss is certainly Oscar-worthy. One loses all sense that he is an actor portraying an historical person as he assumes the persona and, more importantly, the heart of Desmond Doss. He gives a natural, heartfelt performance as he shows us the raw power and sheer courage of a faith-filled individual willing to go into battle with nothing but his faith in God to protect him. The film also shows the power of love.

Before leaving for war, Doss meets the woman he is convinced he will marry. When he leaves for basic training, neither one understands the degree of animosity that Desmond will face as a conscientious objector. There is a particularly poignant scene in which Doss’ future wife, Dorothy Schutte (played by Teresa Palmer), who also could not fully understand the depth of his conviction, has her own epiphany about the true meaning of love when she visits him in jail as he awaits a possible prison sentence.

The second half of the film stands out as one of the bloodiest movie sequences I have seen come out of Hollywood. Yet somehow it isn't violence and blood just for shock value. Rather the violence serves to highlight Doss' superhuman feat on the Ridge in which he single-handedly saved 75 wounded soldiers — creating a rope harness and quietly dropping them over the rim of the ridge to safety below — and doing so without carrying any type of weapon throughout the ordeal.



President Truman awards the Congressional Medal of Honor to Pfc. Desmond Doss on Nov. 1, 1945

It is this unwavering example of what Jesus tried to teach humanity that ultimately won the respect of every soldier and commanding officer in Doss' unit. At the same time, the film is not anti-Japanese. Rather Gibson tries to show the devastation and ugliness of war on both sides, noting that Pfc. Doss saved the life of a Japanese soldier. And to dispel thoughts that maybe Doss was too good to be true, Gibson ends the film with interviews with Doss and pictures of he and his wife and of the ceremony when he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor by President Truman.

At the end of the film, most of us in the theater just sat there, digesting the experience and the life we had just witnessed. What made the experience more poignant was the applause that was spontaneously offered to the numerous veterans who were in the theater that evening sharing this movie experience. Like the 2014 film, "Unbroken" and the amazing experience of Louis Zamperini, "Hacksaw Ridge" is a film that will be long remembered.

More importantly, since viewing the film, I have found myself thinking about what really

makes a hero and an unforgettable individual. Often we tend to think of heroes in terms of what they did or what they accomplished. If that were the only criteria for greatness, certainly Desmond Doss met that criteria in terms of the sheer number of lives he saved. But this film shows us that greatness is also about one's integrity and inner character. Doss' life has made me look inside myself and ask if I have the strength of conviction that he demonstrated. I can only hope that I too can stand firm behind what I believe when called to do so. After all, isn't this a hallmark of a remarkable film?

"Hacksaw Ridge" (rated R) is currently in theaters. Running time: 131 minutes. Director: Mel Gibson; screenplay: Andrew Knight, Robert Schenkkan; main cast: Andrew Garfield, Hugo Weaving, Sam Worthington, Luke Bracey, Teresa Palmer. See IMDB for full film details.

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