

Thirteen Hours

A review by Jonathan Lighter

A long-ago black-ops thriller set in Southeast Asia touted itself with the unforgettable blurb “A story so true it can only be told as fiction!” The no-slack *13 Hours* is based on a story so sadly true—the September 2012 “Battle of Benghazi”—that director Michael Bay and rookie screenwriter Chuck Hogan have calculated it can be told only as an action movie that begins “This is a true story.”

It’s a pretty respectful action movie, to be sure, and, despite having been made by the director of *Pearl Harbor* and the *Transformers* series, fairly true, more or less. Just don’t look for insight or gratuitous reality. The occasionally unsteady focus is on the bravery of six members of the CIA’s secretive Global Reaction Staff, ex-service members working as civilian security for the Agency’s establishments and personnel worldwide. Most of the film’s gaze is directed at former SEALs Jack Silva and Tyrone Woods (TV actors John Krasinski and James Badge Dale); that puts *13 Hours* directly into the continuing parade of SEAL movies, though Woods and Silva’s colleagues Mark Geist, Kris Paronto, John Tiegen, and “Boon” Benton (like “Silva,” a pseudonym) represent the Army and Marines as well.

13 Hours is part evocative docudrama and very much night-time shoot’em-up; but except for a fictional spy meet gone sour and the ensuing wild car chase through teeming streets even before the real story begins, the first half may be little slow for fans of Bay’s shape-shifting, nihilist robots; and for the drama fans, the final eighty of its 144 minutes feel interminable while being all-too-believably incoherent.

The September 11 attack by Libyan Islamist militiamen on the State Department Special Mission Compound in an upscale section of Benghazi jolted the GRS team from their stations at the nearby CIA Annex to speed to the compound, which was basically a temporary residence for visiting diplomats. Rented from a Libyan

hotelier, the property was occupied that night only by Ambassador Chris Stevens, communications officer Sean Smith, and five agents of the Diplomatic Security Service. The handful of unarmed Libyan civilian guards quickly evaporated when the assault began. Taking off almost immediately, and without authorization from the allegedly inept Base Chief known pseudonymously as “Bob” (David Costabile), the team was determined to rescue Americans in the face of smoke, flame, and Kalashnikovs. The five DSS officers at the Compound were saved, but Stevens and Smith, whom they’d escorted according to protocol to a locked, steel-reinforced safe room, did not survive the arson of the building. Unable to recover Stevens’s body, the two security teams sped back under fire to the Annex, which was itself attacked a few hours later. Woods was killed there, as was Glen Doherty, the leader of a third security team that had just arrived on a chartered jet from the U.S. Embassy in Tripoli. The deaths of Woods and Doherty made four Americans dead overnight. Thirteen hours had elapsed from the start of the attack on the Compound to the departure the next morning, on a Libyan Air Force transport, of the last remaining American personnel. Thanks to the efforts of the three security teams, some twenty Americans were saved, most or all of them CIA employees. In the movie, the supercilious but now humbled Bob is forced to croak to Silva, “I’m proud to know Americans like you.”

Early on, there’s a brief workout scene designed to show just how big, bearded, and buff the six GRS operators are: Silva conspicuously drags a tire taken from, apparently, an 8x4 dump truck over the ground by a chain slung around his torso. As for the after-dark attacks, they allow Bay to dazzle his customers with showering sparks, arrowing tracers, flashing muzzles, an illuminated (and fictional) explosive-laden bus thwarted in the nick of time, and bad guys thrown high in flaming, billowing blasts, as though the CIA Annex is providing cover for a secret fuel farm. The burly members of the security team are sometimes indistinguishable in daylight: night is worse. Easier to remember are the repeated scenes of countless rows of tattered white canopies (I think) waving mysteriously nearby like ghosts, and a post-assault moment when mothers and wives search for their dead jihadis in a manner recalling the iconic photograph of grieving women in the Ukraine in 1942: an embarrassingly maladroit directorial choice, really, since the people in Dmitri Baltermant’s famous photo were Jews and the scene that of a Nazi massacre.

Dedicated, reliable, and resourceful, the GRS and their security colleagues make almost everyone else on our side look confused or incompetent. Even Ambassador Stevens, who fares best in this regard, is nonetheless an amiable idealist, whose pep-talk to the locals about the bright Libyan future (the main point of his brief

visit) helps put one of the no-nonsense GRS team to sleep. On the CIA side, however, there's a semi-fictional local interpreter named Amahl (Payman Amaadi) who's confused too until, like the interpreter in *Saving Private Ryan*, he proves his mettle under gruff tutelage, and there's a hot-tempered, fictional case officer named Sona (Alexia Barlier), who does her damndest to call in a gunship or F-16s from Sicily—or anywhere—while mortar rounds fall, windows shatter, and “Bob,” the supercilious, contemptible Chief of Base, languishes. (“You are not giving orders anymore,” Woods finally snarls at boss Bob in action-flick cliché. “You’re taking them! You’re in *my* world now.”) In the movie’s best line, Sona pleads for a screaming F-16 flyover just “to put the fear of God and the United States into them!” No luck.

Few audiences want complicated front-line heroes, and *13 Hours* doesn't give them what they don't want. Those of us bored by sheer pandemonium (and we only) will therefore miss a certain human element. Bay and Hogan almost inevitably take real people and turn them into largely stock characters. (Journalism professor Mitchell Zuckoff does better by them in the bestselling street-level account that is the movie's principal source.) Most of what we know about the protagonists, aside from their military skills and indomitable teamwork, is that they love their families—with whom they Skype whenever possible—that Silva has an unsuccessful real estate business, Paronto has an obscene sense of fun, and Benton is reading Joseph Campbell's *Power of Myth*: “All the gods, all the heavens, all the hells are within you.” Hmm. Sounds important. But can anyone tell why? (The film's second-best line comes from Tyrone Woods: “Payback is a bitch, and her stripper name is Karma.” Sounds Campbelleque—if Campbell had been a SEAL.)

One is grateful that *13 Hours* is no more than ordinarily egregious in its Hollywood departures from its source, though it does assume that the Departments of State and Defense, plus the CIA, are at the mercy of idealistic naïfs, derelict bureaucrats, arrogant incompetents, and dithering generals. It also knows that its action audience needs no convincing of this, any more than they need convincing that a round-the-clock “quick-response base” existed “just twenty minutes away!” in Sicily in 2012. (It didn't.) Some of the film's tension-building maneuvers suggest that with just a little more gumption, the baffled high brass at some place called “Pentagon Mission Control” could have fixed things instanter with movie air power and/or movie commandoes. (The camera lingers ruefully on the motto of the unprepared 51st Fighter Wing at Aviano, Italy: “Return with Honor.”) Congressional hearings have established that the dithering and confusion were real, but they've also determined that no U.S. assets were both near enough and ready

enough to have saved anyone—a point that Bay and Hogan fudge for the sake of drama.)

Contrary to widespread expectation, *13 Hours* tries hard to steer clear of the rancorous partisan debate that years later still envelopes the Benghazi attacks. Action fans want to know the truth, which they don't think they've gotten from no less than eight government investigations, in part because conspiracy theories and political obfuscation, shot through cyberspace at the speed of light, have been warning them not to believe anything coming from the Executive Branch or Capitol Hill. (You can tell from the deliberately tinny voiceover of President Obama's 2011 declaration that freedom and democracy have come to Libya that they really hadn't.) But perhaps, as has been usual since the days of D. W. Griffith, most movie-goers just want to see something sort of like the facts, something more "truthy" than true, that can be acted out in the service of vicarious thrills. It's a difficult and plotless world; can anybody blame them?

Free State of Jones

A review by Jonathan Lighter

Some two hundred fiction films about the Civil War have come out of Hollywood since D. W. Griffith's *The Guerrilla* (1908), but only a handful have sought some historical meaning in the nation's defining struggle beyond sensational effects felt by the movie's cast of characters. Take, for example, the romantic melodrama *Gone with the Wind* (1939)—for decades the paradigm “Civil War movie” for many fans. *GWTW* may exhibit technique, but it's short on theme: certainly the famous shot of countless Confederate wounded at the railway station and the burning of Atlanta suggest an immense tragedy for the South (which in the movie means the white South); but it all pales in comparison to the tribulations and resolve of one person, the beautiful and resourceful Scarlett O'Hara. The trivial or timeless themes presented in other memorable Civil War movies say nothing about the distinctiveness of the war itself. John Huston's *Red Badge of Courage* (1951), to name just one, adapts a fundamentally unadaptable, tightly focused novel that stays surprisingly aloof from the war for the Union: the supposedly typical mind of Private Henry Fleming is the undeviating concern. William Wyler's easy-going *Friendly Persuasion* (1956) eventually gets around to dramatizing conflicting idealisms that with superficial changes might easily have been found elsewhere. The colorful adventures of John Ford's *Horse Soldiers* (1959) are far more central than the banal “theme” (if it rises to that level) that love conquers all, but war separates lovers; and except for its wartime setting, Robert Enrico's dreamlike short feature *Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (1961), brilliantly drawn from Ambrose Bierce's story, has nothing to do with the Civil War. The family drama *Shenandoah* (1965) warns unnecessarily (you would think) that civilians cannot escape the effects of a war that rages around them. John Frankenheimer's docudrama *Andersonville*

(1996) suggests—almost inadvertently—merely that in conditions of barbarism even a fleeting semblance of law is a human triumph.

While these are all good movies in their various ways, none is tied thematically to the War between the States to the exclusion of other wars. A rare movie that is, is Ed Zwick's *Glory* (1989), which may at last have deposed *GWTW* as the most iconic of Civil War movies. Zwick admirably portrays the training, valor, and pride of the 54th Massachusetts within the constraints of a fiction. *Glory* was the screen's long overdue affirmation of the significant role of thousands of African-American soldiers in the overthrow of slavery and the preservation of the United States. That pervasive theme is larger than the plot and the characters and is rooted in the Civil War itself rather than being a commentary on "all wars."

The few remaining Civil War "classics" of creative interpretation (though not often historical fidelity) range from the magnificent *Lincoln* (2012) and the iniquitous *Birth of a Nation* (1915), to the conscientious *Gettysburg* (1993) (with its vilified 2002 prequel *Gods and Generals*), the doggedly realistic *Ride with the Devil* and *The Hunley* (both 1999), and the surrealistically unhinged *Gangs of New York* (2002) (tagline, "America Was Born in the Streets"). While the proverbial visiting Martian would not fully comprehend the American Civil War just by watching these films, he, she, or it might come away aware of the war's intensity and its moral and geographical range.

Writer-director Gary Ross's noteworthy *Free State of Jones* (2016) was initially suggested by Victoria Bynum's 2006 academic study of Jones County, Mississippi. Ross and writer Leonard Hartman morph into dramatic fiction the story of farmer, Unionist, Confederate deserter, outlaw, and local Reconstruction official Newton Knight (1837-1922). A man who owned no slaves, Sergeant Knight deserted the 7th Battalion Mississippi Volunteer Infantry late in 1862, allegedly disgusted by draft exemptions based on slave ownership and by military seizures of crops, hogs, and mules from small farms like his own. The commutation of the military draft for big slaveholders under the "Twenty Negro Law" confirmed that it was a "rich man's war and a poor man's fight." Knight was not alone. In October, 1863, he became leader of a band of perhaps a hundred or more fellow deserters in Jones County—a piney-woods region of relatively few slaves and significant prewar anti-secession sentiment. Knight's was one band among several in the county. The deserters refused to bleed for a government that enforced conscription while preying on the livelihoods of their parents, wives, and children. Their families became a covert source of sustenance for the deserters (who often pilfered and stole from non-family members, though not in this movie). The fugitives explicitly became Union

insurgents when the army entered the Pearl River swamps with troops and hounds to root them out.

Confederate forces put down most of the insurgency in the spring of 1864 and drove Knight and remnants of his band back into the wild. Many who had not been captured, and either sent back to their units or hanged as traitors, made their way to Louisiana, where they enlisted in the Union army.

Not much is solidly known about Newton Knight, a minor figure in the history of Mississippi. Bynum sees him as Robin Hood. Rudy Leverett, author of an earlier, equally scrupulous study, paints him as a lawless jayhawker of no particular allegiance. Ross is all in for Robin Hood, with a dollop of the Swamp Fox and a dash of Mikhail Bakunin as he battles for political and economic justice for the oppressed, black and white. But as a filmmaker, Ross naturally is less interested in documented history than in what woulda, coulda, shoulda happened.

The political high point of the movie is a definite shoulda, as Ross elaborates on the popular myth (which, as Leverett shows, spread from a satirical account in a Natchez paper) that Knight proclaimed a “Free State of Jones” under the U.S. flag at the county seat of Ellisville in 1864, complete with formal Constitution.

Accepting it was so, Ross shows Knight (Matthew McConaughey) and his fictional black colleague Moses (Mahershala Ali) leading blacks and whites, men and women, in a Wat Tyler style attack on Ellisville. (In the preceding scene the solemn and dignified Moses pops from a coffin—like Murdock in an old episode of *The A-Team*—to fire at the bad guys, and furious matrons whip out Navy Colts from underneath their cloaks.) Moses and Knight wheel up a fieldpiece, which a lady stuffs with tenpenny nails. Firing the nails makes something blow up in a gasoline explosion, and the remaining Confederates wisely run away.

Knight soon announces four anarcho-populist precepts as the bedrock for citizens of his Free State. The final one is especially significant to the rest of the movie for demanding racial equality and equal rights: “Every man’s a man. If you walk on two legs you’re a man. It’s as simple as that.”

Mainly on the basis of tradition, Ross conjectures that slaves seeking freedom belonged to Knight’s band. Knight’s grandfather (unlike his son and grandfather) owned several slaves, and at least one of them, named Rachel, may have actively assisted Knight and his men with supplies and information as a real-life Maid Marian. (Elegantly played by Gugu Mbatha-Raw, Rachel seeks refuge with Knight after being abused by her rich master, the fictional “James Eakins,” on whom Knight soon wreaks vengeance.)

What *is* certain is that after the war Knight lived with Rachel as his common-law-wife, as well as, just as remarkably for the time and place, his legal wife Serena (Keri Russell), and Knight fathered several children by each woman, creating “white” and “black” branches of the family. At some point he deeded no less than 160 acres to Rachel, making her one of the very few African-American women in the nineteenth century to own real estate. After Rachel’s death in 1889, Knight continued to live with Serena until the end of his days.

Ross understandably declines to explore the characters’ possibly complicated feelings about these relationships, which would require a separate and very different movie: instead we see an idyllic tableau of Serena happily cuddling Rachel’s mixed-race baby while Rachel chats and cheerfully spins yarn.

Though the Civil War takes up most of the movie, it is really only a prologue for Reconstruction and its sequel episodes. It is here, in the final part of the movie, that *Free State of Jones* finally distinguishes itself with an ambitious historical perspective that goes beyond the life of Newton Knight.

The Rev. T. W. Dixon, Jr., the white supremacist author of the novel and stage-play that inspired D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*, used to declaim on stage that his chief object was to instruct the North as to the presumed “awful suffering of the white man during the dreadful Reconstruction period”; and in the century since the premiere of Griffith’s film, not even the TV miniseries *Roots* (1977), or its sequel *The Next Generation* (1979), has shone so strong a light as does *Free State of Jones* on the abject position of emancipated slaves during Reconstruction, an era which, moreover, figures seriously and realistically in almost no Hollywood film. Ross, however, makes *Free State* the antithesis of Dixon and Griffith at every turn, with heroic ex-slaves and white freeholders and rather than noble slaveowners, with resistance to the Confederacy rather than impassioned loyalty, with the degradation of African Americans before and during Reconstruction instead of a racist “Lost Cause” myth, and with an implicit reminder—absent even from *Glory*—that the Civil War and Reconstruction were not at all the “birth” of a socially or racially united American nation.

Free State of Jones is no pacifist film, as it clearly accepts radical insurgency against exploitation as a legitimate use of armed force; Knight even shows a pair of six-year-old girls how to wield shotguns against cavalymen. Just as clearly it condemns war between nations as destructive and dehumanizing. In the curtain-raising episode, the 1862 Battle of Corinth, Ross depicts combat between armies, even before the age of the machine gun, as mass murder inflicted by one side and endured by the other for no reason discernible to that visiting Martian.

In the battle Mississippians walk shoulder to shoulder against fully deployed Federal infantry and artillery posed as though for a Brady photograph. The rebels march on, bayonets unfixed, as their ranks are chewed up by shot and shell; but unlike Pickett's Charge in *Gettysburg*, this wholly stylized assault in a forgotten battle gains in impact for being wholly disconnected from associations of tragic glory, unlike the spectacle of comparable scenes in *Waterloo* (1970) or *Gods and Generals*, or the painterly aesthetics of the English advance in *Barry Lyndon* (1975). (Ross's brief depiction of a Civil War hospital tent is among the best on film, though the presence of comforting, nicely dressed female nurses—including Victoria Bynum—in a field hospital in walking distance of the battle is a little surprising.)

McConaughey's Newt Knight is soft-spoken, sensitive, brooding, and invincible: with his long beard and smoldering eyes, McConaughey sometimes looks like the Mad Monk Rasputin, and a growly whisper is his favored style of delivery. Unlike Rasputin, however, Knight is a man of heroism and humanity, attributes that regrettably lead to the cringeworthy line, uttered in dead earnest, "Somehow, some way, and some time, everybody is somebody else's nigger," a blindingly obtuse assertion in the context of black chattel slavery. (It's hard to see how it applies to Mr. Eakins, for example.) Knight's humanity, however, gives way when he chooses to strangle a supplicating Confederate officer slowly with his leather belt instead of simply shooting him. Robin Hood used not to do such things, and the real Knight merely shot the man in the back.

Director Ross tries to set the feature-film record of Reconstruction straight, or at least straighter. He shows how after "emancipation" (Ross's quotation marks, in a subtitle), slavery effectively continued, for a time, through a cunning system of coercive "apprenticeships," by which free black children under the age of twenty-one could be taken by their former owners for unpaid labor if a judge had deemed their parents unfit. Attempts by freedmen to register African Americans to vote in the South—supported by the real Newton Knight in his capacity first as U.S. marshal and later as colonel of a black Reconstruction militia regiment—were thwarted by various means, the mildest of which was simply to throw Negro ballots away; more violent individuals resorted to lynching and the newly formed Ku Klux Klan (thugs and arsonists costumed here to look precisely like the "hero" Klan of *Birth of a Nation*). *Free State of Jones* redresses the absence from the big screen of such abuses, and Knight discovers Moses, his fearless wartime comrade and a postbellum voting rights advocate, castrated and hanged from a tree for registering black voters in the former "Free State of Jones."

When history is lacking, it gets replaced by legend. Ross constructively uses the legend-making process to raise Newton Knight to the stature of a pop-cultural hero. But the movie Knight's failure—and the nation's—is that his goal of full racial egalitarianism has not yet been reached. "We lost that war," Rachel says resignedly in 1876, and a flash-forward subplot that is crucial to the meaning of the film tells how in 1948 the state of Mississippi convicted World War II veteran Davis Knight, a great-grandson of Rachel and Newton, of "miscegenation" for "marrying a white woman." The last we see of Newton Knight, beaten by the system, he is rebuilding, symbolically alone, a black church burned down by the Klan. The last we hear of Davis Knight is that his five-year prison sentence was overturned on appeal—but only, according to Ross, because the appellate court didn't want to draw Federal attention to the racist legal system in Mississippi. As in many other former Confederate states, the anti-miscegenation law was in force in Mississippi until it was declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1967.

So the "good guys" do not always win, or if they do the full victory may be a long time coming. Ross creates film drama's first extended look at Reconstruction since the racist distortions of *The Birth of a Nation* and the appealing, if whites-only, soap opera of *Gone with the Wind*. For all its concessions to fiction, for all its Hollywood veneer, *Free State of Jones* ends as a vivid, thoughtful representation of America's "Middle Period" that broadens our emotional sense of the contradictions of the Civil War and its aftermath; it breaks new cinematic ground by conveying an experience of the Confederacy that begins—but only begins—to be as surprising and disorderly as real life, and while Ross's absolute heroization of an ambiguous historical figure delivers emotional, not literal truth, it is to the credit of Ross and his talented cast and crew that concessions to box-office don't prevent *Free State of Jones* from being one of the most interesting Hollywood views of the American Civil War.

Knight's gravestone in Laurel, Mississippi, by the way, reads, "Capt Newton Knight ... He Lived For Others."

Hacksaw Ridge

A review by Jonathan Lighter

Back in 1987 when John Irvin's *Hamburger Hill*—his fact-inspired story about Vietnam—effectively began in the midst of battle, and a mangled American soldier suddenly fell from a tree about a yard from the lens, it was startling. But this is the twenty-first century, and Mel Gibson's *Hacksaw Ridge*, set mostly on the island of Okinawa, instantly grabs the attention of horror-numbered viewers with a GI blasted high in the air in the direction of the audience by a screen-filling gasoline explosion. Enormous chaos follows, as Gibson stokes the fires with roiling flamethrower streams in ultra close-up. Two U.S. soldiers jog in our direction in a momentary, weirdly improbable image: they grip their rifles, dog-trotting at a normal pace—but without seeming to notice that their clothes are aflame. Gibson clearly wants you to know that war is Hell.

The images then switch from Hell to Lynchburg, Virginia in the 1920s, and we discover the small boy who is slated by God or Fate or Chance or History to enter the Okinawan inferno two decades later. For *Hacksaw Ridge* is the melodramatized, simplified, fictionalized, but nonetheless respectful story of Pfc. Desmond Doss (1919-2006), who was one of the most remarkable American soldiers of the Second World War. Or, one easily believes, ever. Yet except for Doss's appearance as a subject of CBS-TV's *This is Your Life* in 1959 and in an indie documentary by Terry L. Benedict in 2004, he lived out his life discouraging acclaim. It says something about popular culture that Doss's name has languished till now and that it took more than seventy years to add him to the short list of American combat heroes whose stories have reached the screen with at least perfunctory attention to their civilian lives: notably Alvin York (*Sergeant York*, 1941), Al Schmid (*Pride of the Marines*, 1945), Audie Murphy (*To Hell and Back*, 1955), Chris Kyle (*American*

Sniper, 2014), and (one must add) George Armstrong Custer of the execrably enjoyable *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941). York was strongly inclined to pacifism, but his marksmanship is said to have killed twenty-five German soldiers in the Argonne as only part of an exploit precipitated by the need to save his squad from death or capture. Unlike York, the no less religious Doss actually served with the official “I-A-O” classification of a conscientious objector. He became the first such objector—and there have been only three—to be awarded the Medal of Honor for, in the words of his Citation, “outstanding gallantry far above and beyond the call of duty.” Doss also held two Bronze Stars for valor and three Purple Hearts for wounds received.¹

The first movement of *Hacksaw Ridge* establishes Doss’s character, with some fictionalized details added in later flashback. In real life as in the film, the very young Doss, who took up his mother’s devout Seventh-Day Adventism, was fascinated by a framed, illustrated version of the Ten Commandments that hung in their home. The Sixth Commandment’s picture of Cain looming over the slain Abel with a club haunted him: the movie invents an incident where Desmond nearly brains his brother with a brick and trembles in horror at what he almost did. Doss as an adult is appealingly played by English actor Andrew (*The Amazing Spider-Man*) Garfield, and we see his praiseworthy readiness to give blood, twice, to an accident victim. This leads to an old-time courtship with his future wife, Dorothy Schutte, in an era and milieu when kissing on first dates was strongly discouraged. (Like most of Gibson’s characters, Dorothy is played by an Australian, Teresa Palmer, who like the rest has perfected an American accent.) Desmond’s father, Tom (Hugo Weaving), is an occasionally violent alcoholic, a brooding veteran of the First World War who tries to steer his son away from any involvement with the army because at the very least he’ll be doomed to live with the memory of lost comrades.

“Thou shalt not kill” and “Love thy neighbor” became dominant principles of Doss’s life. Faced with the draft in 1941, his long membership in the pacifist Adventist church gave him his objector status, and like many other CO’s he preferred military to civilian service as long as he did not have to carry a weapon. Doss, however, went further in refusing even to touch a firearm lest it become all the more tempting to use one. His draft board noted and approved this refusal; it also approved his request to observe the Adventist Sabbath on Saturday, though he had to make up for it with extra fatigues on Sunday. His limited off-duty time he spent in studying his bible. These special considerations, dramatized in the film’s second part, complicated Doss’s life during training, both with his officers and with his barracks mates, though not quite to the degree shown in *Hacksaw*

Ridge. Writers Robert Schenkkan and Andrew Knight manufacture a court-martial for insubordination, and Doss is put in solitary where he nearly loses his mind. Needless to say, he's acquitted in soap-opera fashion. Like the Jewish Noah Ackerman (Montgomery Clift) in *The Young Lions* (1958), Doss is then beaten to a pulp by fellow trainees for being a supposed coward: they discover his toughness when he refuses to snitch. The real Doss, it should be said, was never tried, jailed, or beaten or, as also in the movie, forced to miss his wedding. (Mainly he was the victim of ire, derision, and some thrown shoes, plus a very momentary threat of prosecution.) Instead of a court-martial, a Section Eight mental fitness hearing found Doss fit to stay in the army, as he wished, and he was transferred to the Medical Corps, which he was slated for from the beginning.

On May 5, 1945 Private First Class Desmond Doss, the medical aid man of Second Platoon, B Company, 307th Infantry, performed a series of feats of heroism on a narrow plateau in the assault on Okinawa's Urasoe Mura (known to GI's as "Hacksaw Ridge"). A week earlier, the twenty-six-year-old Doss had, with others, scaled a thirty- or forty-foot cliff under Japanese fire to secure cargo nets that would allow the rest of the company to reach the top. Repeated attacks over several days, however, were repulsed one by one by mortar, machine gun, and artillery fire. After another failed attempt, which left dozens of Americans lying dead or wounded, Doss alone refused to retreat and remained on the ridge in the presence of the Japanese. Using a rope and a kind of supposedly useless double-bowline knot that he had inadvertently created during training, Doss, constantly praying to rescue just one more, lowered something like seventy-five comrades to safety over a period of hours. Days later Doss himself was severely wounded by an exploding grenade. (Partly because it would seem unbelievable on screen, the movie doesn't show that the real Doss, his legs riddled with grenade fragments, rolled off his stretcher for a man he thought more seriously wounded; then a rifle bullet broke his arm.) For astonishing displays of determination and recklessness of danger between April 29 and May 21, 1945, the unassuming, slightly built Doss was recommended for the Medal of Honor, which was awarded in November by President Harry S. Truman.

The third section of *Hacksaw Ridge* recreates the assault on the plateau with the usual movie sleights of spectacle and time compression. As though the reality hadn't been daunting enough, Gibson triples or quadruples the height of the escarpment into a magnificent, hyperbolic image of Herculean effort, which soon becomes Sisyphean as the attack fails in spite of massive preparation by naval gunfire. On top of the ridge, Gibson mostly reins in the taste for sadism and Grand Guignol he became notorious for in *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) and *Apocalypto* (2006).

He includes instead a symbolic episode, perhaps inspired by a memory of Wilfred Owen's "Strange Meeting," in which Doss races underground through a Japanese tunnel and pauses to dress the wounds of a dazed enemy soldier whose uniform is of no matter. The battle rages on (and on) in the manner of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), realistically graphic but with little of the sensational voyeurism of Gibson's previous movies. But Spielberg's *Omaha Beach* was truer and more vivid than any predecessor's, and Gibson can't match Tim Van Patten's beautifully directed picture of Okinawa—including its civilian victims, for whom Gibson spares not even a moment—in the cable miniseries, *The Pacific* (2010).

There is irony in the likelihood that if Doss had honored his father's wishes and declined active duty, dozens of men would have died. *Hacksaw Ridge* has been pigeonholed as both an "antiwar movie" and a "religious movie," but even though such themes are present, we may as well accept Gibson's statement that without glorifying war he was keen to tell a little-known true story of exceptional heroic endurance. (He also wanted to "introduce Norman Rockwell to Hieronymus Bosch," an interesting plan that doesn't even begin to happen.) *Hacksaw Ridge*, moreover, won't turn any grownup into a pacifist, and its degree of religiosity will be in the eye of the beholder: to the end of his life Desmond Doss was an exceptionally devout person, certain in his faith that God had answered his prayers on Okinawa and reluctant to take credit for "saving" anyone. And that's that. But what director, moreover, could have resisted ending the story with the trussed and bandaged Doss being lowered from the dizzying cliff face as the camera swoops down and around, making it look like he's ascending, instead, into a shining, cirrus Heaven?

Note

¹ Cpl. Thomas W. Bennett (1947-1969) and Spec4 Joseph G. LaPointe (1948-1969) were the only other recipients. Both were Army medics who served in Vietnam, and both awards were made posthumously.