RED TAILS

A review by Jonathan Lighter

The Tuskegee Airmen (dir. Robert Markowitz, 1995) was Hollywood's award-winning first salute to the fliers of the 332nd Fighter Group, the sole operational unit of African-American combat pilots in World War II; the Army Expansion Act of 1939 had provided for segregated aviation units, but even in wartime the 332nd had to fight racism just to get airborne. That heavily fictionalized but dignified script told, rather stiffly, how African Americans had run up an enviable combat record against the *Luftwaffe* in the air despite continuous bigotry on the ground. (In a powerful scene, college-grad trainees must give up their railway seats – so that white German POWs may be seated.)

Executive producer George Lucas's more fictionalized *Red Tails* (dir. Anthony Hemingway, 2012) however, tells a narrower story with less intelligence and regrettably winds up demeaning its subject. Lucas describes his and director Anthony Hemingway's method:

> It's designed to be a film [like one made] during the war. It's very patriotic, very jingoistic, very old-fashioned. Corny. ...[It] was held up for release from 1942, when it was shot [audience laughter], and I've been trying to get it released ever since. ...I wanted to make it inspirational for teenaged boys.

Lucas explains further: "I love P-51s. When I was young, that was the hottest airplane. ... Being able...to actually stand here with the P-51s...is like the most exciting thing you can do."

So the film's opening line is "Germans! Let's get 'em!" and that sums up most of it.

While Lucas's larger theme is valor, the larger selling point of *Red Tails* is an eye-popping display of CGI dogfights on a never-before-seen scale, a twelve-year-old's dream in my day: B-17s, P-40 Warhawks, P-51 Mustangs, Me-109s – and, for climax, the swept-wing Me-262, the deadly jet that in larger numbers might have saved the *Luftwaffe*. Lucas, Hemingway, and a dedicated CGI team collect them all. Not that the effects consistently serve a greater realism. Teenage boys are known to be inspired by video games more than by Book TV, so every B-17 knocked from the sky in the prologue catches fire, and Lucas and company make sure you can hear the crews screaming as their burning planes sag out of sight: not one plunges from less picturesque causes like shot-away control surfaces, severed cables, or dead pilots. Later we see that it takes just one machinegun burst to tear any German jet apart at the wing root. And here's the *piece de resistance*: the scar-faced Nazi villain (who snarls "Show them no mercy!" and "Die, foolish African!") evades Lieutenant Joe "Lightning" Little (David Oyelowo) with a flashing, 180-degree hovering turn previously known only from UFO reports. Seeing it once, Lightning quickly learns the same move, flipping back to turn a German plane and pilot into another fireball as the audience goes wild. "It's not *Glory*," Lucas told an interviewer, "where you have a lot of white officers running these guys into cannon fodder": which seems a very perverse misreading of *Glory* (1989).

Notably for a semi-historical film, writers John Ridley and Aaron McGruder assemble as many war-comic clichés as they can muster. Besides that Nazi, who pops up everywhere like Snoopy's Red Baron, there's the scene where Lightning easily turns a German destroyer into a raging fireball with machine guns alone, laughing "How do you like that, Mr. Hitler!" Johnny Cloud, fighter ace of DC Comics' *All-American Men of War* in the '60s, had more *gravitas* under the canopy of *his* Mustang than do the fliers in *Red Tails*, who banter and give voluble advice during their own life-or-death dogfights. Too many sequences of *Red Tails* have that liminal comic-book feel, and the filmmakers' grasp of war and human behavior seems to come chiefly from such sources, plus Lucas's *Star Wars*.

The cartoon quality extends to tactics and, worse, character. So stupid and undisciplined are pilots of all fighter groups other than the 332nd that Nazi "decoy squadrons" can lure them all far, far away, leaving the bombers sitting ducks for Scarface. And, seriously, it works *every time*, which is one of the movie's plot points: "That's how they were trained," explains the serious and competent Col. Bullard (Terrence Howard). "Here's how we change up that strategy." Though pilots Lightning and Easy (Nate Parker) eventually sort out as the main characters, they're hardly more individualized than anyone else, and do nothing much of

human or dramatic interest because you can't fake that with CGI. Lightning falls for an Italian girl he's spotted as beautiful while he flies five hundred feet over her head at 300 m.p.h. They become engaged, so you can guess what happens to him on the big mission to Berlin. "Deacon" (Marcus T. Paulk) on the other hand, leads the men of his flight in Christian prayer and then narrowly survives a fiery explosion.

The human drama of *Red Tails* lies principally in Bullard's campaign to get the planes and aggressive missions that will allow his tough, competent fliers to prove themselves. But that takes a back seat to the celebration of comradeship and of joy in destruction, of dying-buddy pathos and high-explosive thrills. *Red Tails* isn't "old-fashioned": it's a postmodern mash-up of moral earnestness, sophomoric imagination, and deliberate camp – uniquely so, except for the scarily profitable *Pearl Harbor* (2001). Old-time air force movies, in sharp contrast, strove to overcome, or at least neutralize, the kitschy demands of mass, profit-reaping entertainment. Thus we got, in movies teenagers flocked to, the romantic realism of *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo* (1944), the informative drama of *Command Decision* (1948) and *Twelve O'Clock High* (1949), the edgy psychology of *The War Lover* (1962), the grounded defiance of *The Great Escape* (1963), and the historically responsible spectacle of *The Battle of Britain* (1969). *Red Tails* (whose martial imagery is among the most seductive since *The Song of Roland*) sadly lacks most of these qualities. As inspirational dramas of African Americans at war, *Glory* and *The Tuskegee Airmen* still stand alone.

ZERO DARK THIRTY

A review by Jonathan Lighter

Director Kathryn Bigelow's riveting *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), with a controversial screenplay by producer Mark Boal, spotlights a woman named "Maya": a CIA analyst (beautifully played by Jessica Chastain) whose life-focus is on terminating Osama bin Laden.

If Maya's intensity, youth and vulnerability, brass, brains, and kinetic sex appeal seem an unlikely mix, it's because, as the filmmakers admit, she's a "composite" anchoring a thousand events played out over nearly eight years. And as a fiery amalgam, the unsmiling Maya ("recruited…right out of high school") has freedom to do it all: we meet her at a CIA "black site", witnessing, with initial discomfort only, the torture of an al-Qaeda prisoner (Reda Kateb); soon she's in Islamabad under violent terrorist attack, then at a desk zeroing in on bin Laden's top courier (soon tracked to Abbottabad by an American-Kuwaiti surveillance team); next, Maya's behind Tom Clancy shades inspiring commandos at super-secret Area 51, and finally she's at Bagram Airfield to verify that the body the SEALs bring in is really bin Laden's. As writer-producer Boal has noted: "It's not a documentary. It's a movie."

Indeed. At Langley, Maya breaks sharply into top-level back-and-forth to specify the enigmatic Abbottabad compound's stone's-throw distance from the Pakistani Military Academy; when the male-chauvinist CIA Director (James Gandolfini) asks drily, "Who are you?" Maya, the only woman in the room, has the perfect comeback: "*I'm* the motherfucker who *found* the place!" (Female stars of war movies are obliged, at least once, to out-cuss any man on screen; the standard is Demi Moore's Lieutenant O'Neill, in 1997's *G.I. Jane*, snarling at her hectoring, derisive SEAL instructor, "Suck my dick!") *Zero Dark Thirty* is as much about feminist role modeling as it is about the CIA.

After seven CIA operatives are killed in a suicide double-cross at Camp Chapman, Afghanistan–including (in a move as old as Homer) her only near-friend (Jennifer Ehle)—it's not Vin Diesel but Maya who pledges, "I'm going to smoke everyone involved in this op, and then I'm going to kill bin Laden." CIA agent Carrie Mathison (Clare Danes), in the series *Homeland*, needs quirky neuroses to keep

her gunning for terrorists; but Maya has just one crystal-clear motive: she's an American citizen who wants revenge on the mastermind of Nine-Eleven. And Maya—dangerous only when provoked—is a very tough customer.

The final segment recreates Operation Neptune Spear as the SEALs, in stealthy Air Force choppers, glide to their target in the dead of night ("zero-dark-thirty"). One chopper loses lift and crashes by the compound wall. The SEALs pile out nearly unfazed, even as the inmates of the house may be strapping on suicide vests or arming remote-controlled IEDs. The entire sequence shimmers through the green haze of night-vision goggles with as much combat immediacy as anything on screen since *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). When an entrance can't be breached, the SEALs know where there's another. An al-Qaeda firing a rifle is shot and killed. A man rushing toward the SEALs down the stairwell is shot and killed, as is a woman flying around the corner behind him. At the top of the stairs a SEAL whisper-calls bin Laden's name and Osama, a shadow in a doorway, bolts back, and is shot and killed. A woman rushing bin Laden's killer is shot in the foot. She and another woman are searched for explosives. Unlike terrorists, the SEALs try to calm the survivors – kids and women. They grab records and vamoose, intimidating by voice and armed gestures alone a gathering Pakistani crowd.

The plot of *Zero Dark Thirty,* in the police procedural mode of TV's *24*, is that a name uttered by one tortured detainee and confirmed by another anxious to avoid torture eventually leads Maya, years later, to the hideout of bin Laden. Thus, some say, the movie tacitly endorses CIA torture, and Boal and Bigelow are "pre-fascist" advocates whose film is "immoral," "despicable," and "reprehensible"—making *Zero Dark Thirty* the first American war film to be widely denounced as "immoral" since *The Deer Hunter* (1978). (Elsewhere in the media the filmmakers were castigated as "liberals" spilling security secrets while trying to get the anti-torture Barack Obama re-elected: remarkably, the film's release date was accordingly postponed to December, well after Election Day; a much-ballyhooed House investigation of just what the Administration told Boal and Bigelow was quietly and inconclusively dropped.)

Whether torture could be justified is an issue the film doesn't address. (And whether so many vicious methods were ever unloaded on any one suspect is another question, if beside the point.) Nor does the film judge Maya's doctorate-holding mentor, the inquisitor Dan (Jason Clarke), who brutally starves, strips, humiliates, "hurts," strings up, force-feeds, and waterboards his prisoner while remaining affable in between and after. ("God help us" says Robert Ryan to an infinitely less sadistic Aldo Ray in 1957's *Men in War,* "if we need men like you

to win our wars"; Maya's response is merely to observe that simple bagmen can't know what Dan's trying to force out of them.) You're left to form your own opinion, which may be complicated by the scenes of al-Qaeda bombings and machine-gun attacks and Bigelow's prefatory, black-screen audio of wrenching phone calls from the burning Twin Towers. Bigelow and Boal let all chips fall where they may, while those convinced of the mesmerizing influence of film are outraged at what, at best, they see as an abdication of moral responsibility in one direction or the other. While FBI and military interrogators customarily reject as unreliable information coughed up to fend off agony, others (mostly in the CIA) stand by the now banned "harsh interrogations." Senators Feinstein, Levin, and McCain (not usually on the same side) wrote to chide SONY Pictures for distributing so misleading a work.

The moralists' ancient belief in the pernicious influence of art is unresolvable here, but media charges that CIA torture, specifically against Arabs, is being used to "entertain" and make money, may have cost this morally ambiguous docudrama an Academy Award. The critics angrily indict the filmmakers for being less tendentious than themselves.

The ending of *Zero Dark Thirty* lacks the insidious "triumphalism" that some poststructuralists find routinely in war films. Maya identifies bin Laden's corpse, and it's morning in Afghanistan. She boards a C-130 that improbably carries her alone. Most improbably, the pilot asks, "Where do you want to go?" In the great emptiness of the cargo bay, Maya, her mission accomplished, expressively says nothing.

LONE SURVIVOR

A review by Jonathan Lighter

Peter Berg's well-acted, authentically detailed *Lone Survivor* (2013) is adapted—with a few liberties—from the 2007 bestseller by Marcus Luttrell (a decorated former SEAL) and ghostwriter Patrick Robinson (an author of Navy thrillers). Berg's film will appeal to moviegoers who like their violence intense, their villains bestial, their heroes indistinguishable, and said heroes' bones breaking and blood spurting as they tumble headlong, dying in slo-mo amid gorgeous peaks. Clearly on display is the stylistic influence of *The Wild Bunch*, *Rambo*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and, yes, *The Passion of the Christ*—which is to say, the very films one expects to guide the direction of many combat movies for years to come.

Writer-director Berg focuses on Operation Red Wings, a U.S. inter-service attempt in 2005 to eliminate one Ahmad Shah, the commander of a small but effective Taliban force in eastern Afghanistan. Red Wings left the real Marcus Luttrell the sole survivor of a four-man recon team sent into the Hindu Kush; to compound the tragedy, sixteen more SEALs and Army Special Operators died when an emergency extraction helo was lost to an RPG. Cost to Ahmad Shah: perhaps two or three fighters according to the best estimates, though not according to *Lone Survivor*, where, shooting-gallery style, the battered SEALs score head shot after head shot on a force alleged to number two hundred. (Analysts concluded it was closer to fifteen.) In any case, mischance and miscalculation turned Red Wings into a disaster for twenty Americans. Whether he was the principal author of that tragedy is the incubus that the real Marcus Luttrell, the twentieth, still wrestles with.

Severely wounded and at risk of freezing to death, Luttrell survived only because he was discovered and succored by anti-Taliban Pashtuns from a nearby village. Honoring the traditional injunction to protect helpless strangers, they defied Taliban fighters who threatened their family with death if they did not soon hand Luttrell over. It took five days for the Army to locate Luttrell and remove him and at least one of his saviors, Mohammed Gulab Khan, by helicopter. In Berg's version, though, the Army inexplicably refuses to evacuate Gulab.

So how could Marcus Luttrell possibly be responsible for the deaths of his comrades? Here's the film version. After ID'ing Shah at long range, the team is

inadvertently discovered by an elderly goat farmer, a youth, and a young teenager, who are quickly overcome. The compromised and temporarily stranded SEALs must keep these unarmed civilians from alerting the Taliban, and the choices are stark: leave them tied up, probably to freeze or be eaten by wolves; kill them now; or "roll the dice," let them go, and hope for the best. (The actual SEALs carried no ropes or wrist ties: a fatal oversight that ruled out less drastic options which theoretically are still open to Berg on screen.)

A lively debate ensues among the SEALs. In the book, it's settled by vote; in the film, by the decisive order of Lieutenant Murphy (Taylor Kitsch): in both cases, and in accordance with the Rules of Engagement, the unarmed prisoners must be released. Berg has explicitly prepared us for this at the mission briefing—and at that moment, his camera pans briefly to a nameless SEAL who is played (uncredited) by the real Marcus Luttrell. Luttrell shakes his head in dismay and disbelief when he hears that American forces must "comply at all times with the law of armed conflict." Unarmed civilians must not be harmed.

Berg mutes the issue considerably by having Murphy decide. In the book, however, Luttrell casts the clearly decisive vote, one man abstaining. There Luttrell argues for release, but much later he fiercely castigates himself for being weak. Any "great commander," he says, would have executed the goatherds rather than let them alert Shah and thwart the mission. For the deaths of Murphy, Dietz, and Axelson, the book's devoutly religious Luttrell blames his own Christian conscience and especially the "squeaking and squealing liberals" whose dupe and potential victim he thinks he was. "Goddamned liberals," he says, are behind the pusillanimous law of armed conflict and rules of engagement, which, however both Caesar and Christ might endorse. Via ghostwriter Robinson, the book's Luttrell argues passionately for the right to blow away *any* suspicious Afghan or Iraqi civilian, anywhere, at any time. "I cursed…myself for not executing them….And let the liberals go to hell in a mule-cart, and let them take with them all their fucking know-nothing rules of etiquette in war and human rights and whatever other bullshit makes 'em happy."

Both book and film stress the certainty that the Taliban and their presumed liberal stooges (CNN gets emphatic mention) would stop at nothing to railroad the SEALs to prison for a triple killing that to Luttrell would be straight-ahead common sense. In a brief, high-tension scene Berg's Luttrell argues for mercy against his desire and better judgment on the basis of simple self-interest: "They got guys in Leavenworth doing twenty [just] for taking home trophy guns!" In other words, executing the man, the youth, and the boy is unacceptable, not because they're unarmed and it would be *prima facie* a criminal act under military law, but because the Taliban, the liberals, the liberal media, and the media-kowtowing Navy will nail the luckless SEALs to the mast. But since this is an action movie, Berg tells us nothing about Luttrell's later, complicated feelings of guilt for following orders

he didn't want to follow.

The agonizing moral dilemma about unarmed prisoners taken behind enemy lines is textbook; the protective slant to Luttrell's argument is comprehensible to anyone; his belief, rage, and guilt (in the book) that he alone, under the evil influence of conscience and law, doomed the mission and sealed the fate of nineteen Americans (tragedies, moreover, that required additional contributing causes beyond his control) is worthy of Dostoevsky. And a movie that subordinated the blasting and bleeding and heroic soundtrack to that wrenching sense of guilt, instead of the other way around, could have been a memorable one.

But Peter Berg, alas, is not Dostoevsky. As *Lone Survivor* demonstrates, Berg is, for now, simply an accomplished director of action entertainment.

FURY

A review by Jonathan Lighter

Fine direction, throbbing subwoofers, and a screen bursting with detail make David Ayer's World War II film *Fury* (2014) a jolting movie-house experience, featuring a tank battle whose streams of armor-piercing tracers look like ray-gun combat in outer space. But is *Fury* anything more than that?

It's the tail-end of the war, and the defeat of Nazi Germany is imminent; the crumbling *Wehrmacht* and the *Waffen-SS*, however, continue to fight back savagely and without hope. As a serious film about this time, *Fury* is either a near-total – or else a splendid – artistic failure. Yet either way most of it is still a *succès du cinéma*.

Even the "greatest" combat movies fail to impart a true sense of "what it was like" – a burden rarely placed on other genres – and only noncombatants are likely to call any combat movie unreservedly "great." Future novelist James Jones, for example, home from Guadalcanal in 1943, laughed out loud and walked out on *Bataan*, a movie whose qualities, at almost the same moment, much impressed the astute critic James Agee. But no one will laugh during the middle-film intensity of the well titled *Fury*. One reason is the convincing look of it, endorsed by Ayer's team of seven historical consultants. Not even *Patton* (1970) comes close. To the cinematically unprecedented visuals (and roaring audibles) of tank fighting, shock and awe – not to mention pity and terror – are the appropriate reactions. (Yet by World War II standards the five-tank showdown here is small potatoes.)

And pity and terror are what *Fury* is about, with the latter stimulating the former, an old move of sensationalist as well as tragedian. One wonders: what's this sound and fury about, particularly in its far-fetched opening and closing episodes? Impassioned antiwar statement or lurid "war porn"? Both, it seems, and some might wonder just where (or if) one ends and the other begins.

Ayer's portrait of sheer awfulness defamiliarizes land war in Europe as it has appeared in most feature films since *Battleground* (1949), which seemed sufficiently realistic in its day. Ayer's hyperrealism recalls that of the Italian journalist Malaparte's grotesque, only quasi-fictional war books *Kaputt* and *The Skin*; more apposite, though, is Lincoln Kirstein's poem, "Fourth Armored" (1966), which relates attitudes and events like those on the screen. Of *Fury's* central horrors, few seem implausible – though they're unlikely all to have happened to anybody in a single day and night, as Ayers has it.

Plausibility, however, is unnecessary to either "war porn" or highly expressive cinema, so before passing judgment we should explore a little further. The comic-book artificiality of the first ten minutes quickly gives way to a simple but riveting narrative: "Advance. Fight. Advance. Fight." And for an hour and more Ayer becomes a cinematic Svengali until he loses his thematic compass (or tips his cynical hand) in a gratuitous, unbelievable siege, a night-time *Sahara* on steroids. A piercing conclusion almost redeems him.

Fury is a combat initiation tale foregrounding Private Norman Ellison (Logan Lerman) as its bewildered naïf, a clerk-typist yanked from a convoy to be assistant driver and bow machine-gunner in a Sherman tank ("Fury") of the U.S. Second Armored Division. The seasoned crew is led by Staff Sergeant Don Collier (Brad Pitt in a twenty-first century undercut, which complements the occasional cringe-worthy verbal anachronism). Collier's crew (well played by Shia LaBeouf, Michael Peña, and Jon Bernthal) carries itself more like a street gang than like the regular Joes immortalized by Ernie Pyle. Which means only that Pyle was differently selective of those he usually chose to write about.

Collier seems once to have been a reflective individual, but now he is obsessed with the conflicting imperatives of the combat soldier: duty and survival. Duty prevails, but he is also driven by rage and concern in the film's most shocking sequence, turning into an especially vile sort of murderer – if "murderer" in Ayer's hell-vision retains any meaning. The scores of laughing GIs Ayers puts on the scene obviously don't think it does, nor apparently do any officers or MPs. Of Collier's civilian life, we get one hint, relevant and suggestive.

Ayer's best, chilling moments are deftly conceived. Leading tanks across a peaceful meadow, Collier sees through a break in the clouds a sky invaded by the contrails of a hundred bombers thundering toward their target. A few new trails come fanning out from the opposite direction. Collier barely notices: unlike us, how could he care about a battle in the sky?

The upshot comes much later, when the grinning moron Coon-Ass (Bernthal) points out to Norman great billows of smoke rising beyond a distant forest. "See that?" he gloats. "That's a *whole city* on fire." There is also an ominous, nerve-wracking episode with two young German women (Anamaria Malinca and Alicia von Rittberg): despite some pandering it is masterfully ambiguous and restrained. Ayer's fine touches persuade one to overlook his compartmentalized excesses as flaws in a striking gem, fodder for the groundlings that takes nothing away from the rest.

Whether he's cynically detached or passionately engaged, war for Ayer kills, brutalizes, or unhinges everyone it approaches. Nor is the boy who extends mercy at the story's end likely to escape his fate. Of American movies, *Fury* most resembles *The Victors* (1963), Carl Foreman's heavy-handed but daring, anti-Hollywood war film, which *Fury*'s final aerial fade-out unmistakably evokes. But *Fury* excels *The*

Victors as vivid indictment and grieving prophecy.

Heroism in this Grand Guignol is impossible, unless maintaining a remnant of decency and sanity is heroic. "I am the instrument. I am not the hand," gunner and ex-divinity student "Bible" Swan tells his conscience. Earlier, Swan (LaBeouf in the film's best performance), promised Norman, our stand-in, that war would show him "What a man can do to another man."

Norman then beholds the moral and material inferno that is meant.

There's nothing substantively new in *Fury*, but the equation of war and hell has rarely been expressed on screen with such powerful, factually supported images: a corpse crushed under tank treads, a GI on fire blowing out his own brains, an old woman carving meat from a bloated mare, civilians hanged by the SS for defeatism, a flood of refugees with nothing but the clothes on their backs – among them, vivid as the red dress in *Schindler's List*, a groomless bride in a muddied gown. And if *Fury* once or twice adopts horror-show devices, the irreducible difference (as well we know) is that horror shows are sadistic fantasy while *Fury* is a concentrate of the real thing, armor-piercing tracers and all. "History is violent," says Collier. *Fury*, high-functioning despite a self divided, drives that historical constant home unforgettably.

AMERICAN SNIPER

A review by Jonathan Lighter

American Sniper (2014) is director Clint Eastwood's hagiography of Navy SEAL Chris Kyle, whose 160 confirmed kills in Iraq are the highest toll exacted by any military sniper in American history. And true to Hollywood form, almost every memorable moment is either invented or embellished, to judge from Kyle's bestselling autobiography of the same name, written with the aid of Jim DeFelice and Scott McEwen. The media has already noted that Kyle's nemesis, a roving marksman called Mustafa, whose sniper skills are nearly equal to his own, is mostly a plot-driving fabrication. (Think *Enemy at the Gates*.) In the film, Kyle also ferrets out an al-Qaeda enforcer called "The Butcher," who kills an informer's child by drilling a hole in his skull. The Shia warlord Abu Deraa is said to be the model, but the book never mentions either. And, astonishingly, Kyle is on a Fallujah rooftop, with no real transition, shortly after al-Qaeda destroys the Twin Towers.

Such liberties—and many, many more—are no surprise. Movies do have to move, and they do tend to pander. Nevertheless the controversy ramped up here and abroad by the devices and certainties of *American Sniper* proves again just how seriously the ax-grinding classes take their war movies and their (or other people's) war heroes. Left-wing gadfly Michael Moore implied that the patriotic Kyle (virtually wrapped in an American flag on the posters) was a back-shooting coward. A writer in the *Guardian* described Kyle as "at a bare minimum, a racist who took pleasure in dehumanizing and killing brown people," while right-wing pundit Sarah Palin fired back that "Hollywood leftists" are "not fit to shine Chris Kyle's combat boots." Other critics are frightened and offended by unstudied statements made by the real Chris Kyle.

"I loved killing bad guys," he told DeFelice and McEwen. "I'm not lying or exaggerating when I say it was fun." Similar sentiments appear, just as fleetingly, in Jason Hall's screenplay, which uses The Butcher as the objective correlative of Kyle's printed words: "Savage, despicable evil. That's what we were fighting in Iraq. That's why a lot of people, myself included, called the enemy 'savages.' There really was no other way to describe what we encountered there." Such strong language from an honored American in the twenty-first century surprised and disquieted critics unfamiliar with the furies of war.

Flash back to the '80s as young Kyle's Christian disciplinarian father explains forcefully that there are three kinds of human beings: "sheep, wolves, and sheepdogs," a familiar analogy that first appeared in Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman's *On Killing* in 1996. The protective "sheepdogs" ("blessed with the gift of aggression," in Dad's peculiar phrase) employ the violence of wolves to guard their helpless ovine charges. Dad threatens the boy with a leather belt if he ever turns sheep or wolf, and Chris takes that commandment seriously in joining the military in the late '90s. Both book and film emphasize that Kyle's chief concern was to protect American lives.

Both versions of *American Sniper* emphasize Kyle's scrupulousness—enforced by witnesses, command, and regulations—in taking down only individuals who were actually aiming weapons at Americans. His first kill—a woman who was approaching marines with a grenade—was the only one that unsettled him. (On screen she leads a gratuitously invented child who also dies.) Kyle's shooting clearly did save American lives. He writes, moreover, that "Everyone I shot in Iraq was trying to harm Americans or Iraqis loyal to the new government. . . . Everyone I shot was evil. I had good cause on all of them. They all deserved to die." Indeed, the most strident critics of the film (and of the man) decried Kyle's level of moral certitude as reprehensible in any human being, and more so in a role-model movie hero. In the film's sole moral crisis, Kyle agonizes over whether to kill a boy who has picked up an RPG and looks ready to aim it. "Put it down! Put it down!" Kyle mutters on his rooftop as his finger begins to squeeze. The kid puts it down, runs away, and Kyle collapses in relief: but unquestionably he would have fired. The real Kyle says, however, "I wasn't going to kill a kid, innocent or not." (If the movie is trying to show that both sides in war victimize children, there may be better ways to do it.)

But *American Sniper* (2014), like it or not, is an absorbing, well acted, very atmospheric piece of filmmaking. Besides its immersive sense of place (the urban devastation is, in movie terms, "post-apocalyptic"), it expresses with immediacy much of the bravado of bestselling memoirs like Marcinko and Weisman's *Rogue Warrior* (1992) and Luttrell and Robinson's *Lone Survivor* (2011). (Hollywood has long given up on introspective warriors like Gary Cooper's *Sergeant York*, Henry Fonda's *Mister Roberts*, or even Tom Hanks's Captain Miller in *Saving Private Ryan*.) As Chris Kyle, Bradley Cooper is by turns rowdy, affable, tough, conscientious, brutally menacing, and stolid. Like the real Kyle, he is finally preoccupied—not by his kills but by the memory of Americans, including friends, his shooting "couldn't save." He stares at his living-room TV, the soundtrack exploding

with bombs and machine guns: the dollying camera then shows that the TV is off. Sienna Miller as Kyle's wife Taya is believably fearful for his safety and the future of their marriage. Kyle's postwar self-therapy is to devote his spare time to wounded, traumatized, and amputee vets. This led to his shocking death in 2013 at the hands of an unhinged vet he had taken to a gun range as a therapeutic exercise.

In the end, though, Eastwood and Hall's undemanding *American Sniper* is not very enlightening and not very deep. (At least the pop Freudianism of an earlier sniper movie, *Jarhead*, was junk-food for thought.) His father's Manichaean values enabled the extroverted, physical, good-natured Kyle to kill repeatedly and remorselessly in war; yet his thousand days in Iraq between 2004 and 2009 led to anguish for his family and a distressing sense of his own limitations. The movie ends with news footage of Kyle's 200-mile, Texas-size funeral procession and his well-attended memorial ceremony at Cowboys Stadium.

Clearly a crowd-pleaser, *American Sniper* is the highest grossing war film ever, having earned by Oscar time more money than all other best-picture contenders combined. In the book's 2014 edition, Taya Kyle expresses satisfaction that "the essence" of the couple's story is now permanently "out there." But it would be interesting to know precisely which details of that essence moviegoers have found most compelling.

THE IMITATION GAME

A review by Jonathan Lighter

You might not think so to look at it, but director Morten Tyldum's *Imitation Game* (2014) is largely a handsome melodrama in defense of a straw man. Benedict Cumberbatch—not everyone's favorite actor—is unforgettable here in the role of that straw man, a highly sentimentalized version of the Cambridge mathematician and computer visionary Alan Turing. According to the meticulous biography on which the film is based, Alan Hodges's *Alan Turing: The Enigma* (1983), the real Turing resembled his screen counterpart only slightly in code breaking achievements and almost not at all in personality. The customary end-credit disclaimer that the characters do not represent real individuals is accompanied by another, advising anyone reading the tiny print that *The Imitation Game* is "not factually reliable."

What is both true and on screen, however, is that the rather shy and eccentric Turing was a genius when it came to code breaking and mechanical computation, that his best friend (and briefly his fiancée) at the U.K. Government Code and Cypher School at Bletchley Park was a mathematician named Joan Clarke, and that, in 1940, Turing had a hand in breaking the most advanced version of the German Enigma code, which encrypted German military and naval communications. Twelve years later Turing was convicted of committing a homosexual act, sentenced, in lieu of prison, to over a year of estrogen treatments to eliminate desire, and died, apparently a suicide, in 1954. It is also true that crossword puzzles were used to test the abilities of potential code breakers, and that a Soviet agent, John Cairncross, worked at Bletchley. (It is not true that Turing was ever suspected of treason, though Tyldum and scriptwriter Graham Moore have him investigated twice.) The movie correctly cites carelessness in German transmissions as a key factor in breaking the code but downplays its crucial role. Barely alluded to is that the Poles had broken a simpler version of Enigma in 1932 and in 1939 had shared their knowhow with both London and Paris. But in the popular arts, as we know, the unshakable resolve of the hero usually trumps the workings of chance and the achievements of other people.

But enough of quibbling. As an absorbing entertainment rather than a source of information about Alan Turing, *The Imitation Game* is excellent. But more interesting are its two fundamental themes. The first is Turing's struggle to get his colleagues, alienated by his (exaggeratedly) insufferable personality, to see the

Enigma problem his way. Because he's an arrogantly impatient man with social skills at zero, no one but Joan (Keira Knightley) can really stand him until his mysterious calculating machine cracks Enigma. As a final title-screen makes clear, the film's main intention is to condemn the British law (repealed decades ago) that criminalized homosexual acts, and the bigotry that led the Crown to prosecute and punish even a hero like Turing. The film's second theme, however, and it is made almost inadvertently, may be of more lasting significance: what precisely are the role and responsibilities of intelligence agencies in wartime? Or, nowadays, in peacetime as well?

The Codebreaker's Dilemma had long been known to Turing's superiors of the Secret Intelligence Service ("MI6"), but it gained urgency as soon as Enigma was broken. The dilemma is this: How freely can decrypted military intelligence be put to use without revealing that the code has been cracked and prompting the enemy in turn to devise one that is even more intractable?

In *The Imitation Game* that dilemma seems to have occurred to no one but Turing who, with breathless minutes to spare, convinces his colleagues not to send planes to save an Atlantic convoy which, incredibly and like the lone *Lusitania* in 1915, has "hundreds" of "women and children" on board. A sudden aerial ambush against a wolfpack of U-boats would make further Enigma decryptions dangerous or impossible to use to "win the war," as Turing puts it. And the same scene has Turing and the boffins deciding for the future just how much detail will be safe to tell even their own chief. *The Imitation Game* takes it as obvious that a handful of top mathematicians are best qualified to determine military operations in wartime, and that it's fine for them to conspire, as a hero band, to keep their own government in the dark. (The name Edward Snowden comes to mind, if only obliquely.) The scene raises important questions, however: Whose lives shall we sacrifice through inaction, and whose shall we save? And who should be "we," and why?

Turing sums up in a voiceover:

> People talk about the war as this epic battle between civilizations. Good versus evil, liberty versus tyranny. Armies of millions bleeding into the mud, fleets of ships that weighed down the oceans, packs of airplanes that dropped bombs until they blotted out the sun itself. But it wasn't.

Well, of course it was, but the movie reminds us that World War II was more than that. It says that the outcome was largely decided, not by the blood, sweat, and tears of millions, but by office-bound analysts and shadowy teams of specialists trying

to outwit each other in the dark. Clausewitz recognized the enormous role of chance and error on the battlefield. In battle, however, innumerable chances work unpredictably on each other; but in a war of analysts, the chances may seem to be fewer but each one (like the carelessness of German cryptographers) has greater consequences than in Clausewitz's century. Cracking Enigma may have shortened the war by two or more years and saved, according to *The Imitation Game*, "fourteen million lives." But what if the breaks had gone the other way? What if, as in Iraq in 2003, the intelligence to be analyzed is partly bogus and largely mishandled?

The whirring calculating machine to which the cinema Turing devotes himself without human stint, and which is designed to analyze "159 million million million" letter equivalences and decoy combinations, is touchingly named "Christopher," in covert honor of Turing's one friend, his schoolboy crush, who once gave him a book on secret codes. The real Turing, however, said by Hodges to have been well liked at Bletchley and far more of a team player than in the film, confidently called his somewhat less magical machine "Victory."

UNBROKEN

A review by Jonathan Lighter

It took both Coen brothers and two additional screenwriters, plus the directorial wand of Angelina Jolie, to turn Laura Hillenbrand's four-million-copy bestseller *Unbroken* (2010) into a respectful but banal film that plods soullessly for over two hours while saying little that is fresh about being a prisoner of the Japanese in World War II—one of the book's primary themes. Hillenbrand's absorbing biography recounts the life of Louis Zamperini (1917-2014)—an American distance runner in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Seven years later, as an Air Corps bombardier, Zamperini survived one crash landing followed by his plane's ditching into the Pacific, a month and a half adrift in a rubber raft, and more than two years of atrocious confinement by the Japanese. But compared to Hillenbrand's vigorous account, and aside from two or three effective sequences, the cinematic *Unbroken* (2014) is a plotless, leaden exercise indeed. The epilogue summation of Zamperini's postwar life suggests a film that could be considerably more compelling than the one actually on screen. Indicating the picture's sensibility is the recurring, faint golden haze that movies like the regrettable *Memphis Belle* (1991) employ to impart nostalgia, even for a past that was horrible, as it most certainly is in *Unbroken* (2014).

In spite of Zamperini's new marriage, his immediate postwar years were another trial—marked, as Hillenbrand reveals, by revenge fantasies, nightmares, alcoholism, and difficulty in holding a job. Jolie mentions none of this. The change came in 1949 when he experienced a religious conversion at Billy Graham's Christian Crusade. Like Englishman Eric Lomax in Jonathan Teplitzky's *The Railway Man* (also 2014), Zamperini traveled to Japan to forgive his torturers in person. He regained control of his life, wrote memoirs, and became an evangelical speaker. The distance star returned to Japan years later to run the torch relay for the 1998 Winter Olympics—at the age of eighty-one.

One man who refused to meet with Zamperini was Sergeant Matsuhiro Watanabe, the story's antagonist. Watanabe, called "The Bird" by Allied prisoners, ruled both camps in which Zamperini was held during most of his two-year captivity. Wanted for war crimes in 1945, Watanabe nonetheless emerged from the shadows in the 1950s, when American interest in Japanese war criminals had long been dissolved by the realignments of the Cold War. (He died wealthy and unrepentant in 2003.) Hillenbrand's Watanabe is a repressed homosexual

sadist who finds release in singling out the indomitable Zamperini for special tortures amid the atrocious treatment routinely inflicted on war prisoners by the Japanese. (Watanabe, who was twenty-five in 1943, is played by a shrewdly cast, disconcertingly innocent-looking Takamasa Ishihara.) *Unbroken* is not the first time that repressed homosexuality has been invoked to explain military excess: it motivated another Japanese commandant in *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (1983) and the American Sergeant Callan in *The Sergeant* (1968), not to mention the more prominent examples of T. E. Lawrence in *Lawrence of Arabia* (1964) and General Cummings of Mailer's novel *The Naked and the Dead* (1948).

Unbroken does manage three excellent sequences. The first is the opening B-24 raid on a Japanese-held island, very believably fabricated even if these particular four-engine, fifty-thousand pound bombers make little more noise than a buzzing Cessna. The second sequence comes when Zamperini's crew is forced into the ocean, ironically while scouring it for some downed American airmen. (Hillenbrand reports the grim likelihood that, in 1942-43, as many American crews were lost on such patrols as were rescued.) To a viewer, miles of open sky and the decent marksmanship of the American gunners make the island raid look potentially survivable from the beginning. But later, as the big shadow of Zamperini's plane steadily widens over the vacant sea and the crew rush to launch rafts, the increasing sense of helplessness becomes overwhelming. Later there's Tokyo before the fire bombings of 1945, its downtown as bustling as Manhattan, its people stylishly dressed and civilized; its office buildings fitted out with quiet elevators and high-gloss lobbies—hardly the iniquitous alien capital never quite revealed in movies like *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo* or *Pearl Harbor*. Eventually we see the city in ashes.

The flimsy characters of *Unbroken*, however, including Zamperini (Jack O'Connell), never rise to the level of these episodes, partly because the Americans are mostly at the mercy of either the ocean or of Watanabe, whose freedom of action makes him marginally more interesting than his protagonist victim. But even Watanabe is a mere bundle of evil traits compared to the developed personalities of commandants like Rauffenstein (Erich von Stroheim) in *Grand Illusion* (1937) and Saito (Sessue Hayakawa) in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957).

In place of interiority, Jolie intrudes flashbacks. Suddenly we see Zamperini in Torrance, California, a delinquent son of Italian immigrants. But Louie Zamperini can run. His older brother turns him into a high-school and then national collegiate star, advising "If you can take it, you can make it," the slightly equivocal platitude that Jolie determines to prove above all else. When the going gets immeasurably tough, we flash back again to Louie's training on a dirt road in

California. Eventually he's in a labor camp, abused till he's barely able to drag a six-foot railway tie along the ground, but his never-quit defiance lets him hold it over his head for many minutes (thirty-seven according to Hillenbrand) at Watanabe's furious command. It is a plainly impossible feat for anyone, even though Zamperini looks like Atlas morphing into Christ and back again. His fellow PWs stop work in the golden afternoon to stare and murmur "You can do it." And, of course, he can.

The real Louis Zamperini was taken seriously ill just as filming was completed. Laptop technology enabled director Jolie to bring him a screening of his life, which Zamperini, then ninety-seven, watched from beginning to end, knowing he was on his deathbed—surely the only person in history to have had that experience. Jolie modestly declined to reveal Louis Zamperini's reaction, but Laura Hillenbrand, who consulted on the film, has said he was "delighted."

Note

Three prominent experts in "endurance, survivalism and torture" consulted by the *New York Post* seriously doubt Zamperini's memory of the magnitude of certain events: http://nypost.com/2014/12/21/is-all-of-the-powerful-tale-unbroken-really-true/ (accessed January 21, 2015).