**Hacksaw Ridge review – Mel Gibson's war drama piles on the gore**

[**Peter Bradshaw's film of the week**](https://www.theguardian.com/film/series/peter-bradshaw-film-of-the-week)

[Hacksaw Ridge](https://www.theguardian.com/film/hacksaw-ridge)

Andrew Garfield delivers a sympathetic performance as a soldier who refuses to carry a gun in this powerful real-life story of heroism in world war two…

[[](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/jan/26/hacksaw-ridge-review-mel-gibson-andrew-garfield-second-world-war#img-1)](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/jan/26/hacksaw-ridge-review-mel-gibson-andrew-garfield-second-world-war" \l "img-1)

 Shock and gore … Hacksaw Ridge is offered up as the ultimate redemption for Gibson himself. Photograph: Mark Rogers/AP

**C**ombat medic and conscientious objector Desmond Doss, played by [Andrew Garfield](https://www.theguardian.com/film/andrew-garfield) in this true story from the second world war, is crouching in a crater at the Battle of Okinawa. With the terrifying uproar of war all around, fellow soldier Zane (Luke Pegler) mutters that he still can’t believe Doss is crazy enough not to carry a weapon. “I never claimed to be sane!” grins Doss. Actually, that is exactly what he claimed to be. An earlier scene in this movie showed Doss insisting to a US army physician that he was not mad, did not hear voices from God and had no intention of accepting a psychiatric discharge. Doss was a patriot who had volunteered for military service after Pearl Harbor, but his Seventh Day Adventist convictions and memories of violent abuse in his own family meant he wanted simply to be a doctor on the field of battle. No gun. Doss was finally decorated for rescuing dozens of wounded comrades from a part of the steep and heavily defended Maeda Escarpment, nicknamed Hacksaw Ridge.

It is a story of courage, robustly told by director [Mel Gibson](https://www.theguardian.com/film/melgibson) with screenwriters Robert Schenkkan and Andrew Knight, who create a brutally, even unwatchably violent picture of war. Garfield himself delivers a sympathetic, plausible performance: more mature and substantial than his contribution to Martin Scorsese’s Silence. Yet there is something missing.

[Hacksaw Ridge](https://www.theguardian.com/film/hacksaw-ridge) is a war movie that naturally aspires to more than just gung-ho exploits and is offered up as prime awards bait, and the ultimate redemption for Gibson himself, who 11 years ago disgraced himself with bigoted slurs and a drunken antisemitic rant: “Jews are responsible for all the wars in the world!” You might even be forgiven for wondering if making a war movie about a soldier who avoided fighting was Gibson’s way of triangulating a path out of all that.

Doss is a regular guy who shows an untrained knack for medical skill when he uses his belt to apply a tourniquet, saving the life of a man who had shattered his leg in a car accident. In the hospital, he falls in love with a nurse Dorothy (Teresa Palmer) and proposes marriage, but breaks his dad’s heart when he tells him he’s going to enlist. This is Tom Doss (Hugo Weaving), a man still haunted by the friends he lost in the first world war and who has retreated into miserable, aggressive boozing. When he joins up, Doss infuriates Sergeant Howell (a slightly miscast Vince Vaughn) and Captain Glover (Sam Worthington) with his conscientious objection. He is bullied and beaten, but winds up earning the respect of the very men who made his life a torment.

Doss is repeatedly and fiercely challenged by the army on his refusal to bear arms, but no one points out that, unarmed or not, he wants to use medical skills to assist the uniformed killers and make the war machine of death run more smoothly. The basis of his “conscientious cooperation” is not in fact investigated all that rigorously.

As for the battle scenes themselves, they are undoubtedly well shot. Gibson shows some of the storytelling relish he had in his jungle drama Apocalypto (2006) and the insatiable taste for blood and guts he demonstrated in his controversial The Passion of the Christ (2004). It looks almost like a second world war horror film, as if the excessive violence is there to make up for the hero’s non-violence. Yet, apart from the gore, the story it tells is pretty conventional, and there are even times during the extended battle sequences that the dramatic tension slackens.

It is more gruesome but less ruminative than Spielberg’s Saving Private Ryan (1998) and less surreal than Sam Fuller’s The Big Red One (1980). Strangely, the film it reminded me of more was Clint Eastwood’s Heartbreak Ridge (1986), and not just because of the title echo. Eastwood’s grizzled old gunnery sergeant sees action in the Grenada invasion of 1983, disproving the modern namby-pambys who had disapproved of his methods. When the chips were down, they did need him and his values after all. Like Doss.

Hacksaw Ridge is an old-fashioned war film, melded with a kind of new-fashioned explicitly violent drama. A shooting war is still exciting. Desmond Doss renounced his weapon. Mel Gibson wants to hold on to his.