

Hacksaw Ridge partners with DAV

Film focuses on Medal of Honor recipient, DAV member's actions, effects of war



Andrew Garfield (far right) portrays conscientious objector and Medal of Honor recipient Desmond Doss, credited with carrying 75 injured soldiers one at a time down a cliff face to safety during the Battle of Okinawa. The young medic went on to rescue and render aid to several others in the days that followed, before being seriously wounded himself.

(Photo by Mark Rogers © Cross Creek Pictures Pty. Ltd.)

Academy Award-winning director Mel Gibson's newly released film, "Hacksaw Ridge," will undoubtedly earn millions of dollars at the box office and get plenty of award buzz during

its opening weekend, but its impact has the potential to extend well beyond Hollywood.

The film is based on the extraordinary true story of late DAV life member Desmond Doss, an Army medic who became the first conscientious objector to be awarded the Medal of Honor. Doss is credited for singlehandedly saving and evacuating 75 wounded men from behind enemy lines, without firing or even carrying a weapon, during World War II's Battle of Okinawa.

"I did a lot of research prior to principal photography because the responsibility I immediately felt taking on the role was palpable," said Andrew Garfield, who portrayed Doss in the film. "It's difficult to even attempt to understand who he was and how he was able to do the things that he did with such conviction and bravery and love in his heart through such a horribly violent, traumatizing situation."

While speaking at the 2016 DAV and Auxiliary National Convention in August, Gibson said he intentionally made the battle scenes of the film graphic in order to give viewers a better understanding of the horrors of combat. He also included Doss' upbringing with a father afflicted with wartime post-traumatic stress disorder to articulate an often-overlooked aspect of war: the effects it has on service members and families at home.

"When I was a kid, I was talking to the World War I guys and getting their stories as research, and it took me on this journey of discovery about the experience of men and women who have to go into these conflicts, and the families of the men and women who have to go into these conflicts," said Gibson, who starred in "We Were Soldiers," a film about the Battle of Ia Drang in Vietnam. "I was struck by every generation that I've spoke to about the indelible mark left on their hearts and minds and souls by the experiences they went through, and how underserved they are in being helped to deal with these issues."

Gibson, who attended the convention with Vince Vaughn, one of the film's stars, went on to say the plights of veterans need more national attention, and he hopes the film will bring more awareness to veterans' issues—something Doss quietly dedicated himself to in his later years.

“He’s obviously an incredibly inspiring figure,” Garfield remarked of Doss, who passed away in 2006, “someone who lived by his inner convictions and someone who wanted to be of service to his fellow man.”

“It was a tremendous honor for many of us who had the chance to meet Mr. Doss before he passed,” said Rick Freeman, Commander of Chapter 21 in Piedmont, Ala, where Doss spent his last years. “He participated in various chapter activities after he and his wife had moved to the area. He was involved. He was active and wanted to help as much as he could.

“We would invite him to speak at events and, whenever he had a chance, he put his fellow veterans on a pedestal. He just wanted to be a rank-and-file member and continue standing up for his fellow veterans as long as he could. He wanted to support and be there for the rest of us.”

Freeman participated in Doss’ memorial service and, as a line officer for the DAV Department of Alabama, helped lead efforts to rename Alabama Highway 9, which stretches from Piedmont to Centre, Ala., the Desmond T. Doss Sr. Memorial Highway.

“It was incredibly humbling to represent Mr. Doss’ fellow DAV members as the community celebrated his life. We didn’t know there was going to be some blockbuster movie coming out about him, but it wasn’t lost on us that there should be,” Freeman said. “People like Desmond Doss are so rare. He was a man of strong convictions, and we should all be proud that he was part of our cause.”

DAV Department of Alabama Adjutant Chad Richmond also remembered Doss’ dedication and humility.

“When you read his citation, you know he may have been one of the greatest heroes in military history, but he didn’t feel that way,” Richmond said. “He just did what a medic was supposed to do. He did his job. He didn’t think of himself as someone special. He was just a veteran, a humble country boy.

“Having seen the film, I hope he rests in peace knowing his tremendous bravery and sacrifices are inspiring new generations and are shining a spotlight on the military experience in a way that will help his fellow veterans.”

Part of the film’s outreach mission, led by Lionsgate Grassroots Marketing head Debora Galloway and former DAV National Chaplain Ron Ringo, has been to bring more public awareness to the lessons of Doss’ life. In addition to a screening and feedback session at DAV’s convention, Ringo and Galloway have spent the months leading up to the premiere hosting events that raise greater awareness of the film’s messages. This included building awareness for DAV’s free services.

“A very small percentage of the American public has served in uniform, and an even smaller number has served in combat,” said DAV National Adjutant Marc Burgess. “So anyone who wants to know the real cost of freedom should go see this movie to give them some comprehension of the sacrifice and the service of those who have made our country free.”