

Only the Brave (2017)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 2 hours 13 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 3; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 2.

Our star rating (1-5): 4.5

*The mark of a good leader is loyal followers;
leadership is nothing without a following.*

Proverbs 14:28

*Be strong, and let us be courageous for our people and for
the cities of our God;*

and may the Lord do what seems good to him.”

1 Chronicles 19:13

Joab spoke those words just before a battle, but they could also apply to the peacetime endeavors of the 20 firefighters under the command of fire supervisor Eric Marsh (Josh Brolin) in Prescott, Arizona. Indeed, their foes, the deadly wildfires that break out periodically are far more dangerous than any army of the Ammonites or Syrians, especially the one that climaxes this film, the 2013 Yarnell Hill fire. Director Joseph Kosinski, joining with scriptwriters Eric Warren Singer and Ken Nolan, brings his experience gained from his sci-fi features *Oblivion* and *TRON: Legacy* to an action thriller in the recent past. It is as timely as the nightly reports of the devastating fires that have been plaguing California.

Marsh, called “Supe” by his crew, is a seasoned firefighter with a keen sense of predicting the path of a wildfire. He longs to move on from cleaning up the aftermath of a fire to his crew gaining the training to be designated Hot Shots, and

thus assigned to fighting on the front lines of fires. Encouraged by the grizzled old chief Duane Steinbrink (Jeff Bridges) and the Mayor, he sets out to put his 20-man crew into the fire fighters' equivalent of a Navy Seals program. He is married to a woman as strong as he, Amanda (Jennifer Connelly), a veterinarian specializing in treating wounded horses.

During the long training segment, we get to know some of the crew. (As in the film about the trapped Chilean coal miners, [The 33](#), there are too many heroes for the filmmakers to profile all of them.) Jesse Steed (James Badge Dale), Eric's second in command, because of his age, experience and calmness will undoubtedly assume command when his friend moves on or retires. The most screen time is given over to new crew member Brendan McDonough (Miles Teller), just released from jail and estranged from his girlfriend because he has impregnated her. Eric had hesitated to hire such a risky prospect, but, liking something about him, decides to take a chance on him. Many in the crew do not share their chief's hope for the young man, giving him the derisive nickname of "Donut." Christopher Alan MacKenzie (Taylor Kitsch) becomes Brendan's chief tormentor, eventually, of course, becoming a supporter and bunkmate.

The training is hard and rigorous. Lots of long runs; practice with their tools, and most of all, Supe's insistence that everyone be able to take cover beneath their fire shields within 30 seconds. These thin foiled coverings have saved many lives when a fire turns suddenly and engulfs a crew before they can drop their tools and scramble out of its path. And so, they practice and practice until they meet Marsh's goal of less than half a minute.

Even though we know the outcome, there is suspense when an inspector goes out with the crew to a fire to evaluate the men, due to Eric and him clashing over where they should go to establish a baseline to set their counter fires. Earlier Eric had been over ruled by a chief when Eric argued that a fire

would soon shift and engulf a near-by community, so they should work between the fire and the houses. The fire did shift as Marsh predicted, the result being that they stood helplessly while the houses burnt to the ground. Now, despite the inspector's strenuous objections, Eric follows his instincts, and sure enough, the fire does turnabout—but this time the cluster of homes is saved by the men. What will the irate inspector put on his report?

The film makers make the most of this suspense, but soon Eric and crew give themselves the name of the Granite Mountain Hot Shots, and there's a sequence in which they are fighting a fire that threatens Prescott. They bask in the celebration by Prescott's citizens, all of whom regard them as heroes. The latter are grateful that they saved not only their hometown from a deadly fire, but also saved its beloved old juniper tree that had been a gathering spot for many years.

Then comes what we know is the inevitable climax, the segment centered on the Yarnell Hill Fire. It is a harrowing scene, one we should keep in mind whenever we see on our TVs shots of raging fires being fought by men armed only with hoes, shovels, and axes, or of the large planes dropping their loads of water and chemical retardants on the fire. In an earlier scene we see that this can be dangerous to the firemen when a plane accidentally lets loose on the men as well as the target.

You will note that the casualty figure is 19, not 20. It is ironic, but true, that it is Brendan "Donut" McDonough who survives because Marsh had sent him to a hilltop to observe and report via radio what the fire was doing. Thus, separated from his mates, he was able to hitch a ride to safety while his friends became trapped, having to resort to clambering beneath their fire shields. However, this fire was too large and hovered over them too long for the shields to be able to protect them. A quick shot of the charred death scene is very jolting.

Therefore, the film does not end with the usual mourning and tribute to the deceased's courage, but also deals with the anguished Brendan's intense feeling of guilt. He readily confesses that all his crewmates were far better persons than he, so why him? At this point Amanda proves that she is as adept at treating a wounded human as well as horses. We saw earlier her patient treatment of a badly battered white horse brought to her. Though also dealing with her own grief and that of the other wives, she reaches out to Brendan, assuring him that he will be all right. Her perception is right in that he had reconciled with his girlfriend and had stepped up to the responsibilities of becoming a father, so he has much to live for.

There are so many good human-interest scenes in this film that I can say it is the best disaster film that I have seen. The focus is not on the special effects, though the huge fires depicted are awesome, but on the people involved. They are not cardboard heroes, Eric and Amanda, for instance, come close to ending their marriage when her long-simmering resentment over his leaving her alone so much because of his high-pressure work, plus his lack of interest in siring a child, cause her to erupt in anger. A rift also opens between Eric and Brendan when the young man, observing the trouble between his mentor and Amanda, asks to leave the Hot Shots for a local team of firemen because he does not want to be gone from home so much to the neglect his new wife and child.

With so many personal details inserted, we come to really care about the team, and thus their tragic fate really hits viewers hard. The film pays fitting tribute to brave, but flawed men, who every time they go out into the field never know if they will return. These men make the super-powered Marvel Comics heroes seem like pikers. If you liked *Backdraft* or *Ladder 49*, you will love this well-filmed true story. It even contains a great story of redemption. Some viewers will want a tissue close by when they see the real firefighters during the end

credits!

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the November issue of Visual Parables.