

Fury (2014)

Rated R. Running time: 2 hours 14 min.

Our content ratings (0-10): Violence 8; Language 8; Sex/Nudity 3.

Our star rating (0-5): 4

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

Isaiah 6:8

Writer/director David Ayer's violent take on World War 2 follows the usual story arc of showing a disparate group of soldiers becoming a family. They endure hardships and dangers as they band together to kill their enemies.

The difference is that these guys don't dig foxholes because they are sardined into a tank that too often has become a flaming coffin for others unfortunate enough to run afoul of a German Tiger Tank. The film might remind some of the Israeli tank film *Lebanon* back in 2009, or the vintage Humphrey Bogart film *Sahara* (1943), except that Ayer's is filled with far more graphic violence—and even a brief scene of a sexual encounter (nongraphic) during a lull in the fighting. In the battle scenes heads are blown away, men ablaze climb out of their shattered tanks (one shoots himself rather than endure the flames), and bodies are crushed into the mud—indeed, the film begins with violence, our hero pouncing on and driving his knife through the eye socket of a Nazi SS officer riding by on a horse. I wonder if the horse, seen approaching through a mist, was intended to make us think of the Book of Revelation and its Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse?

Brad Pitt ably plays Sergeant Don 'Wardaddy' Collier, the

commander of an M4 Sherman tank dubbed "Fury" in white letters painted on the barrel of its 76mm gun. He and his four-man crew are part of the final Allied advance towards Berlin in April 1945. His gunner has just been killed, and he is disgusted with replacement Norman Ellison (Logan Lerman), a fuzzy-cheeked youngster who admits to never having gotten any closer to combat than the regional HQ where he had been laboring hard to master 60 words a minute. The Sergeant disgustingly observes, "I had the best gunner in the entire United States Army in S.E. Now I have you." He assigns Norman the messy duty of cleaning up the blood and pieces of the dead gunner's remains smeared inside the tank.

Sure enough Norman soon screws up when the men hear movement in the bushes alongside the road. He sees a young German but does not shoot, that second's hesitation allowing the Germans to fire the first shots, killing a G.I. An intense firefight breaks out, with another group of the enemy firing at them from a distant line of trees. After the G.I.s wipe out the enemy machine gun nests, a captured SS officer is brought up. As we will see, Wardaddy has a special hatred for this infamous group, so he orders Norman to shoot the man, even though the officer, begging for his life, has showed them pictures of his family. The Sergeant, the only one who speaks German, knocks the photos into the mud, and starts the battle of wills with his green crew member. The other three men merely watch, sharing Wardaddy's disdain for the reluctance of the boy to kill in cold blood. Norman tries to protest that shooting a prisoner is not right, but Wardaddy sneers, "This is war, there is no right or wrong." The boy tries to hold to what he knows is right, but the Sergeant has placed his pistol into the boy's hand which he steers toward the Nazi—and all but pulls the trigger. Norman shoots the German, and the others go about their business as if they had witnessed nothing more than the shooting of a snake or a mad dog.

Thus we can see that Norman is similar to teenager Henry

Fleming in Stephen Crane's tale about the American Civil war *The Red Badge of Courage*. Having crossed the threshold of violence and emerging with blood on his hands he slowly gains the trust, and eventually even the respect of his comrades. These include gunner Boyd Swan (Shia LaBeouf), a combination of fierce warrior and a religious Bible quoter; his loader Grady Travis (Jon Bernthal), a belligerent Southerner proud of his origins; and driver Trini Garcia (Michael Pena), a smart Mexican-American who likes his liquor. Wardaddy is the most experienced of them all, telling Norman, "I started this war killing Germans in Africa, then I killed Germans in France, and now I'm killing Germans in Germany." The other three vets hold him in awe, and supposedly we are too.

The Americans roll into a village where a contingent of Germans is holed up in a building. Agreeing to surrender, they file out with their hands up, the G.I.s startled that most of them are school-aged children, pressed into service by the desperate Hitler. However, one of those surrendering is an SS officer, who is promptly shot. There follows the interlude already mentioned when Wardaddy takes Norman into an apartment of a woman and her teenaged daughter, and a strange scene unfolds in which they share some fresh eggs and other hard to acquire food. This comes to an abrupt halt when German artillery shells the town, and four tanks are dispatched to a nearby cross roads deemed strategic. A battle with an almost invincible Tiger Tanks leaves Fury as the only surviving tank—and soon its crew will have to make the most serious decision they have ever made in their lives—indeed, one that could end those lives.

This film will be viewed in different ways by those who relish the adventure and courage of soldiers versus those taking strong exception to Wardaddy's "This is war, there is no right or wrong." Studies conducted near the end of that war, and subsequently, have found that almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of front line combatants did not fire directly at the enemy. Apparently many

did believe there is a right and a wrong when it comes to killing. Professional soldiers blamed the church and Sunday school (and perhaps the synagogue?) for this widespread failure of their training programs designed to turn civilians into killers. (I hope they were right.) They apparently needed more Wardaddies.

The film shows well what Stephen Crane called "the red sickness of battle"—and novelist James Jones called "the red haze" in *Thin Red Line*. I remember this was shown in a graphic scene in Terrence Malick's film adaptation of the book. After an especially hard-fought firefight during which the G.I.s lost many of their comrades, the surviving Japanese emerge from their foxholes and bunkers to surrender, but the Americans open fire, killing all of the enemy.

People of faith will be intrigued by gunner Boyd Swan, the most religious of the group. Early as the tank rumbles on he is engaged in a conversation in which he advocates that even Hitler could be saved. Later he quotes a passage that pertains to a decision they all must make, "Here's a Bible verse I think about sometimes. Many times. It goes, 'And I heard the voice of Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send and who will go for Us?' And I said, 'Here am I, send me!'" Norman repeats, mumbling, "Send me." To the surprise of the crew members Wardaddy adds, "Book of Isaiah, Chapter six." Apparently there is more to the cruel warrior's back-story than they (or we) thought. Also, following the climactic battle (far more over the top than necessary for our excitement) there is a surprising incident, a true moment of grace, for which there is offered no explanation, leaving us to realize that graciousness and decency are not limited to just one side in war.

This is a film that some will shy away from because of the violent acts depicted, but for others it will offer much food for thought, as well as a sense of feeling indebted to what Tom Brokaw has called "The Greatest Generation."

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