

Lone Survivor (2013)

Rated R. Running time: 2 hours, 1 min.

Our content advisories (1-10): Violence 8-; Language 8;
Sex/Nudity 0.

Our star rating (1-5): 4

*A friend loves at all times,
and kinsfolk are born to share adversity.*

Proverbs 17:17

*... all the people to the last man, surrounded the house;
and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you
tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." Lot
went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and
said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly.*

Genesis 19:11

Written/director Peter Berg adapted his film from the book of the same title by Marcus Luttrell with Patrick Robinson. Set in the mountains of Afghanistan, it is the true story of a failed Navy SEALs' operation to take out a Taliban leader responsible for the deaths of numerous soldiers and civilians. During the opening credits we see scenes in which candidates for the Navy SEALs are put through a grueling series of tests that stretch body, mind, and spirit. Those who fall by the wayside are to place their helmets on the ground. By the time we get to the story, there are far more helmets on the ground than are being worn by the exhausted but victorious survivors.

Lt. Cmdr. Erik Kristensen (Eric Bana) assembles his soldiers and describes their new mission to kill Ahmed Shahd (Yousuf Azami). To provide recon four SEALs are flown by helicopter and dropped on the far side of the mountain overlooking the

village. Once they hike to the top they can see the Taliban in the village streets. Two unfortunate events disrupt their plans. Three shepherds, an old man and two youth, come upon them. They are quickly subdued, but more difficult is the question of what to do next. If they kill them, word is bound to leak out, bringing dishonor to the SEALs. If they keep them tied up, they will either freeze to death or be attacked by the wolves that infest the forest. But if they turn them loose, they are bound to alert the Taliban. They radio for advice, which reveals the second problem. Shortly after contacting headquarters, they lose the connection. They are on their own.

As they discuss their dilemma Marcus says, "The rules of engagement says we cannot touch them." Max Axelson (Ben Foster) responds, "I understand. And I don't care about them (the three Afghani prisoners). I care about you. I care about you. I care about you. I care about you." They decide that they must let them go, and so the three herders run down the mountain into the village. Soon a large band of heavily armed Taliban is looking for them.

The ensuing gun battle, fought on the run, is one of the most intense combat sequences since *Saving Private Ryan*. The better armed SEALs manage to kill a number of the enemy, but one by one they are hit, and also badly battered when they tumble, head-over-heels over cliffs and down steep slopes, banging into rocks and trees. Their tough training shows up in that they can keep on fighting until—

These intrepid fighters can even find humor in their desperate situation. During one bone-bruising tumble down the mountainside Marcus loses his gun, but then finds it. Always the optimist, he says to Michael Murphy (Taylor Kitsch), "See? God's looking out for us." To which his buddy replies, "If this is what happens when God is looking out for us, I'd hate to see Him pissed."

All during their ordeal their base radio operator keeps trying to restore contact, but to no avail. Search helicopters fly over them but do not spot any activity. We already know the fate of the four by the film's title, the suspense being in the identity of "the lone survivor" (unless, of course, you paid attention to the name of the author of the book the film is based on).

When confronted with such a film viewers dedicated to peacemaking face quite a challenge—of whether or not to join the audience eagerly approving of the death of the Taliban members shot down by the Americans or to repeat again the words of the prophet who wept over Jerusalem, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes." (Luke 19:41) The four are "our guys," so we want the best for them, but does this mean rooting for the death of those trying to kill them?

One worthy thing the filmmakers do not do is to lump all Afghans together. As we see in a marvelous sequence, there would have been no survivor had not Mohammed Gulab (Ali Suliman) and his young son come along and carried the severely wounded survivor back to their Pashtun village. And when the Taliban come looking for the SEAL, we see that compassion and hospitality are shared by both Muslims and Christians (both of which hark back to the ancient story of Lot and his guests at Sodom). Gulab risks his family and his entire village by refusing to handover his guest, telling Taliban leader Ahmed Shahd that because the man is his guest, his tribe's tradition of hospitality requires that he protect him at all costs.

What a wonderful touch to this otherwise blood-soaked story! The realistic depiction of the impact of bullets on the human body make this a dubious film for the squeamish, but for those who can stand the sight of blood, the film both honors the memory of those lost in this operation (16 troops died besides the three of the recon team, a Taliban rocket bringing down a

helicopter full of would-be rescuers) and affirms the integrity and goodness of most of the civilian Afghans our troops are trying to help.

Someone wrote that all war films that try to depict the true nature of conflict turn out to be antiwar films. I am not sure this is always the case, but they certainly stand apart from the jingoistic war films I remember as a little boy during WW 2 when we were cheering Dennis Morgan as he mowed down a column of "Japs" as his Flying Tiger P-40 swooped down on them, or when SeaBee John Wayne used his bulldozer to push a Japanese tank over a cliff, and we saw its occupants "jabbering" in surprise and terror. Peter Berg waves no flags except that of the SEALs themselves, nor does he get into the politics of the war. Unlike the old war movies where someone makes a speech about fighting for democracy, these guys do not look at the big picture, basically fighting for each other. Thus the intense bonding with one's teammates and the drive to leave no one behind. This is a band of brothers, anyone of whom would take a bullet for the other. Although their mission is to kill might be questionable for a person of faith, their mutual bonding and sacrificial support is praiseworthy—and unforgettable.