

The Great Raid

A stirring and poignant, if little known, episode of World War II gets earnest treatment in *The Great Raid*, a drama based on the true story of hundreds of American soldiers rescued by an Army unit from a Japanese POW camp in the Philippines in late January 1945.

The telling of this rescue is tripartite, from the viewpoint of the military unit--the Sixth Ranger Battalion--and its men, from that of the prisoners themselves, trying to survive in horrendous conditions, and from that of the Filipino underground in Manila. The rangers are led by Colonel Mucci (Benjamin Bratt), a tough, if rigid, commander uncertain if his very green troops are up to their task. He is backed, yet challenged, by Captain Prince (James Franco), designer of the raid and one cool customer. They must, with 120 men, attack and take over a highly protected camp with 500 starving men on their last legs. In the camp itself, the leader is Major Gibson (Joseph Fiennes), stalwart but dying of malaria, kept alive by tough, cynical Captain Redding (Marton Csokas). The Manila scenes are built around Margaret Utinsky (Connie Nielsen), a Lithuanian nurse who works at the city hospital but aids the underground by trying to smuggle foodstuffs and medicines to the POWs.

This three card shuffle, which takes place over the five days leading up to the raid itself, is deliberately but confidently paced, though, after a time, the Manila segments become less consequential and, finally, superfluous. A new wrinkle is introduced, too, as a Philippine militia unit is enlisted to play a key role in the raid--a depiction that may be unique in American WWII films.

The tension ratchets up in the last third of the picture, with ping-pong intercutting between the imminent raid and the prisoners' agonies (a particularly vile Japanese commander makes their lives more and more miserable). The raid itself is vivid and crisply realized by director John Dahl; you sense quite clearly the geography of the camp and how it is breached and taken. A heartbreaking death of one of the story's principals is the film's concession to solid sentimentality, but much of the movie's narrative is delivered in a plain brown, "just-the-facts, ma'm" style straight out of the old Dagnet playbook.

The Great Raid is straightbacked, foursquare, and stoic; it's a throwback--evincing the spirit, if not the look, of war movies made in the late 1940's. Its leads, in the old days, might have been played by screen luminaries like Erroll Flynn and Robert Taylor. Their contemporary equivalents may lack such star power, but their workmanlike efforts still serve. One for the war buffs.

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