

## Desert One

Forty years after it happened, the story of one of the most daring military rescue attempts in US history comes to the screen. The documentary feature “Desert One” recounts the April 24-25, 1980, attempt to rescue 52 US State Department officials who were taken hostage by Iranian revolutionaries in Tehran in November 1979. The film comes from two-time Academy Award® winner Barbara Kopple (“Harlan County USA” and “American Dream”) who produced and directed the film.

Kopple has incorporated into her film a wealth of recently unearthed archival sources, as well as intimate interviews with President Jimmy Carter, Vice President Walter Mondale, newscaster Ted Koppel, former hostages, journalists, and, most strikingly, some Iranian student revolutionaries who orchestrated the take-over of the US Embassy in Tehran (who were interviewed in Iran).

The film backgrounds the complex planning and intelligence-gathering necessary for the secret operation, which presumed landing eight helicopters into the southern Iranian desert (together with support aircraft) which were to fly to Tehran and rescue those held hostage. A disastrous landing—three copters eventually becoming disabled—led to an aborted “Desert One” and an ignominious disaster. Kopple uses imaginative animation to actualize an operation that was never filmed, while extolling the bold risk-taking and resolve of the enterprise.

Perhaps the most striking element of Kopple’s film is the never-before-heard live satellite phone recordings of President Carter talking to his generals right as the mission unfolds. These undramatic, “just the facts” exchanges turn out to be breath-taking sequences that will have viewers who lived through the period both chilled and sucking in their breath. Those same viewers may be both surprised and touched at the soft and diffident qualities of Carter’s distinctive drawl, veiling a man quelling an inside storm.

The director saw “Desert One” as a patriotic raid, “... a roller coaster ride of a story well worth telling.” Kopple added: “It is a film about U.S. leadership and gumption, our leaders taking responsibility--even when things go wrong.” She also emphasized her decision to recount the Iranian view: “Hearing their side of the story can make us reflect. This is a story that few remember or even know and it might inspire us now.”

*(The documentary is rated “PG-13,” runs 89 mins., and is available streaming through AFI).*

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