

# Faith in war

The GI Film Festival (GIFF), held at the Washington, D.C., Carnegie Institute, May 14-18, showed cinematically what true grit and valor American soldiers possess, working to defend "God and Country," as GIFF's award-winning narrative short, so titled, compellingly presented.

Last month's premiere of "Brothers at War" (Capt. Isaac Rademacher and younger brother, filmed by brother Jake in Iraq), tapped for best feature documentary, pierced the dark cloud of negative media images — low soldier morale, confusion, bitterness — swept away by the film's portrayals of dedication, strength, heart, lots of heart, and a clear sense of purpose.

This is the second year of the festival attended by celebrities, dedicated to our soldiers, including Gary Sinise, James McEachin, Stephen Baldwin and John Ratzenberger and made possible by top corporate sponsors including Motion Picture Association of America.

MPAA Chairman Dan Glickman told me the festival shows how film "can do great things . . . [as] powerful scenes from history . . . influence people's lives," especially the young.

Filmmakers such as Ken Wales, who directed "Amazing Grace" (2006), about William Wilberforce's crusade to abolish slavery in Britain, are play-

ing a huge role in ensuring an accurate portrayal of some truly powerful scenes from history in which faith plays the key role.

Mr. Wales pointed out at GIFF's "Faith in the Foxhole" Friday forum that Stephen Spielberg incomprehensibly excised the key fact underlying "Saving Private Ryan" (1998): It was a chaplain, not Tom Hanks' character, Capt. John H. Miller, who saved Pvt. Ryan.

Mr. Wales is a longtime Hollywood filmmaker, with many other credits, including the celebrated CBS mini-series "Christy." Back in the 1950s, he came across Jack Warner's plans to turn the novel, "Sea of Glory," into what Warner dubbed "our finest film" ever, about four World War II chaplains who gave up their life jackets to the last four men on the sinking Dorchester. But plans for the film were soon scratched.

Mr. Wales never forgot this gripping story and by dint of perseverant effort, has now turned this moving story into the film, "Sea of Glory," due in theaters at year's end. As he described it, "it's a noble story" as opposed to dwelling on a negative issue like war bonds, depicted in Clint Eastwood's "Flags of Our Fathers."

He is also in the development process for filming "With Wings as Eagles," sequel-to-1981's Oscar-winning "Chari-

ots of Fire," the true story of two British track athletes who compete in the 1924 Summer Olympics — one, a devout Scottish missionary, running for God; the other a Jewish student at Cambridge, running for fame and against prejudice.

A "fan favorite" was last month's film fest opener — "Gods and Generals," laced throughout with faith as generals, soldiers and their families, both North and South, turned to God so naturally as if it was the beating of their hearts. Lines like these — "Lord if you show us the way, we will follow" (Stonewall Jackson, played by Stephen Lang); "General, the deployments are sound, the rest is in God's hands," (Robert E. Lee, played by Robert Duvall) — are typical of this breathtaking film.

The film's director, Ronald F. Maxwell, told me it was thoroughly researched "with the best historians" possible. "So when you see the soldiers praying, that's not me imposing that on them, that's how they were. To take faith out of the story would be to make the story false because it was completely interwoven in every day of their existence."

The impact of faith in present-day war was further explored during "Faith in the Foxhole."

Father Robert Cannon, who served as an Air Force chaplain in Iraq, related how on the Feast of St. Francis, patron saint of animals, he blessed the beloved dogs of soldiers from West Virginia and Georgia. During the next two days, the dogs sniffed out several bombs saving 100 lives. He told them

"you guys have had a God experience" prompting one to ask, "How long is the blessing good for?"

Then, too, Father Cannon, careful to say he's "no expert" shared how he has observed that faith gives people "a greater capacity" to handle trauma. "Great people," he said, "experience horrible evil and it wounds them — not just physically, not psychologically but spiritually. And, that's the dimension we [as a society] don't typically deal with." But without getting to this "deeper level, you're still on the surface."

Vietnam vet Brian Delate, director of the festival-winning narrative feature, "Soldier's Heart," which unwraps Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), from which he also suffers, gave powerful testimony at the forum. "This guy," he said of Father Cannon, "he's giving me so much that at the time I didn't know I needed."

The star of "Soldier's Heart," James Kiberd, whose father suffered from PTSD, described the film as a "tool for healing," noting they had "already won" by the gratitude expressed by vets, one of whom thanked him for "seeing me" — PTSD's invisibility rendering the ordeal that much more difficult.

Maybe a sequel to Soldier's Heart exploring the spiritual dimension of PTSD healing is in order. Brian Delate, call Ken Wales!

Mary Claire Kendall is a Washington journalist and commentator for both print and television.