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Days of Glory (Indigenes)

By Kirk Honeycutt

With strong visuals and even stronger emotions, Rachid Bouchareb's "Days of Glory" makes a powerful war film about a particularly unique subject. World War II historians tend to ignore the contributions and sacrifices made in the liberation of France by North African or "indigenous" soldiers in the French army. A tough offensive from the South and from Italy helped take the pressure off both the Allies following the Normandy landing and the Soviet army on the Eastern Front. Casualties were high among these French troops, many of whom were from France's colonies.

In his film, Bouchareb pays tribute to the heroism of these men fighting for the liberation of a mother country they had never before seen. The film should win critical praise and do solid theatrical business in all French-speaking territories and former French colonies. Elsewhere, "Days of Glory" will make a strong film for specialty venues. The film is slated for release in France in late September.

In a fairly conventional manner, Bouchareb, who wrote the script with Olivier Morelle, follows the exploits of several North Africans who enlist in the French army in 1943. Their campaign starts in Italy and continues through Provence and the Vosges before a handful of survivors fight a final battle in an Alsatian village against a German battalion.

The main focal point is Said (comic actor Jamal Debbouze ably taking on his first dramatic role), yet the other main characters get about as much screen time. Said's mother begs him not to enlist but he is determined to fight for France.

During the campaign in the south, Messaoud (Roschdy Zem) falls in love with a French woman but is unaware officers are censoring his letters to her. Abdelkader (Sami Bouajila) chafes at the Moslem's second-class citizenship in the French army when it comes to promotions and leaves. Levelheaded Yassir (Samy Naceri) agrees in principle but displays loyalty and bravery under fire. Their sergeant, Martinez (Bernard Blancan), is constantly torn between devotion to his troops and his own mixed feelings about North Africans.

"Days of Gory" makes no departures from previous war films, but the

tensions between the French commanders and the indigenous troops -- and the conflicts among themselves over how best to respond to provocations -- gives the film its dramatic punch.

If there is one thing you wish Bouchareb might have included is a scene or even a line in which one of his North Africans characters would explain this loyalty to a country that does not always return that loyalty.

Scenes of combat, especially the final battle in a tiny village, are well staged and shot. It is somewhat distracting though for Debbouze, who lost use of his right arm in a childhood accident, to go through an entire war with his right hand in his pocket.

Final credits make note of the shameful fact that with the decolonization of Africa, the French government froze the pensions of ex-servicemen from its former colonies. To this day the issue remains unresolved.

DAYS OF GLORY

StudioCanal

Tessalit Productions

Credits: Director: Rachid Bouchareb; Screenwriters: Olivier Morelle, Rachid Bouchareb; Associate producer: Jean Brehat; Co-producer: Jamel Debbouze; Executive producer: Muriel Merlin; Director of photography: Patrick Blossier; Production designer: Dominique Douret; Music: Armand Amar, Khaled; Costumes: Michele Richer; Editor: Yannick Kergoat.

Cast: Said: Jamel Debbouze; Yassir: Samy Naceri; Messaoud: Roschdy Zem; Abdelkader: Sami Bouajila; Martinez: Bernard Blancan.

No MPAA rating, running time 125 minutes.