

## HEARTBREAK RIDGE \_\_\_\_\_ 7.5/10

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*"You been freeze-dried or doin' hard time?"*

*Written by James Carabatsos*

*Directed by Clint Eastwood*

Clint Eastwood ... Gunnery Sgt. Tom 'Gunny' Highway

Marsha Mason ... Aggie

Everett McGill ... Major Malcolm A. Powers

Moses Gunn ... Staff Sergeant Webster

Eileen Heckart ... Little Mary Jackson

Bo Svenson ... Roy Jennings, Palace Bar Owner

Boyd Gaines ... Lieutenant M.R. Ring

Mario Van Peebles ... Corporal 'Stitch' Jones

Arlen Dean Snyder ... Sergeant Major Choozoo

*Major G.F. Devin: You know, some men in your position might look forward to retirement. Maybe think about taking the wife on an around the world cruise. But that's not your way, is it? No. Instead you choose to harangue my staff with a request for transfer to a fleet marine force unit. In fact the very unit you got busted out of some time ago for insubordination.*

*Highway: [woman marine enters office] That's true, major, I have had my differences with some limp dicks.*

The poignant opening frames, accompanied by a drum roll, which show black and white footage of soldiers from the forgotten meatgrinder that preceded Vietnam—the Korean War—fade into a scene in a big city jail, where Marine Gunnery Sgt. Tom 'Gunny' Highway (Clint Eastwood) is holding court... profanely. No kidding, the expletive-laden, obscenity-charged language in this movie from start to finish is not only fresh and funny—I never knew there were so many words for sex organs and sex acts—it would leave half an hour of dead silence in any showing of the film on commercial television.

As I was saying in my review of Charlie Wilson's War, like Tom Hanks, Clint Eastwood almost always makes a movie that's entertaining. Heartbreak Ridge is no exception. Further, if you can put aside your expectations and stereotypes of a 1980s Clint Eastwood film, you may discover some fairly deep character work in this homage to the American soldier-warrior. For one thing, two world-class actresses bolster the give and take: multiple Academy-award nominee Marsha Mason plays Gunny's volatile, long-suffering ex-wife and Academy-award winner Eileen Heckart (Butterflies are Free, 1972) plays the widow of Stony Jackson, the leader of Highway's battalion who was killed in action at "Heartbreak Ridge."

So there's more to the movie than meets the eye or tickles the funny bone. It's classified as a comedy, which is fair enough—the dialog between Highway and Stitch Jones (Mario van Peebles) on the bus is worth the price of admission—, but the dedicated old soldier Highway (and the young recruit Jones) has some significant psychological issues that have to be resolved. We get a view of the politics and organizational problems of the modern military. And then there's a "real-war" deal that ends up being serious business, too.

Gunny Highway is an anachronism. He's a war hero, winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor from his exploits in Korea, and he has served, seeing action, in almost every major US military conflict since then. But it's 1986, he's close to the mandatory retirement age, and there aren't so many battles left for him to fight any more; he routinely gets drunk and disorderly, defies authority, and wants desperately to transfer from his warehouse job to a unit that might conceivably see combat. He gets his wish. They give him a reconnaissance platoon to train... which Stitch Jones coincidentally has also joined. So will the platoon be successfully trained? Will it see action? Basic war movie plot.

The complement to the war story is whether Gunny will be able to patch things up with Maggie, will she ever let him back into her life. He's finally beginning to realize that there's more to life than all the time signing up to fight for what's right, he sees that his martial spirit and all the bad habits he's acquired have cost him more than he wants to admit... and caused those he loves a lot of anguish. He wonders, in

particular, if he can make amends with the only woman he's ever loved, maybe ride off into the sunset to that Avocado ranch she always talked about. Maggie lives close to the base where he's been assigned. She's toughing it out as a cocktail waitress, nursing sore feet, and doing the best she can. It's fairly obvious, despite her resentment about Gunny's conscientiousness and hard-living ways, she loves him profoundly, too.

In this combination war movie/love story/comedy, Gunny is shown trying to become more sensitive to women in general: on the bus trip to his new assignment, then later in his truck as he waits for Maggie in the parking lot, are magazines like Bazaar, Cosmopolitan, and a handful of others. Maggie discovers he's been reading this material, then later when she finally lets him into her apartment, he starts out like Dr. Phil or Oprah:

*Gunny: Tell me something, did we mutually nurture each other?*

*Maggie: I beg your pardon.*

*Gunny: I mean did we communicate in a meaningful way in our relationship?*

Then we can see how the screenwriter transitions to the dialog that conveys what the relationship was like and what the two of them are like as individuals:

*Gunny: You know I've been thinking about the past lately. I was just wondering what went wrong.*

*Maggie: With what?*

*Gunny: With me, the Corps, with us?*

*Maggie: That is so damned much like you. You never could see that everything doesn't fit so neatly into right and wrong.*

*Gunny: What else is there?*

*Maggie: [sighs] It isn't that simple.*

It's a great scene, made doubly so by extraordinary acting... by Mason and Eastwood. He really lays to rest the "bad actor movie star" rap he's been getting since the Spaghetti Westerns 20 years previously. Another reason I like the scene is it's rife with self-discovery, taking a page out of my own major relationship; I'm sure it applies to several other couples as well.

Peebles is excellent in his role, as are the other principal actors. A lot of the minor characters are fashioned out of standard action-flick cardboard, and don't pass Believability 101. But the movie is a fine, humorous, sensitive treatment of love, marriage, and commitment. It doesn't disappoint in the war movie department either.

Check it out; highly underappreciated.

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Clint Eastwood | Marsha Mason | *Heartbreak Ridge* | *War Movies*