Culture



Spencer Stone, Anthony Sadler, and director Clint Eastwood on the set of "15:17" (Warner Bros.)



by Rose Pacatte

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Clint Eastwood's new film is a harrowing tale of heroism.

On Aug. 21, 2015, Ayoub El Khazzani (Ray Corasani), a 25 year-old Moroccan man, boarded the high speed Thalys train headed from Amsterdam to Paris in south Brussels. He locked himself in the bathroom and later came out with 270 rounds of ammunition strapped to his bare chest, carrying an AKM assault rifle. A man tried to block his way, but El Khazzani knocked him to the ground. Mark Moogalian (himself), a 51 year-old American traveling with his wife Isabelle (herself), confronted El Khazzani. He was able to take the rifle from him but El Khazzani shot him with a pistol, nicking an artery in his neck.

Clint Eastwood directs "The 17:15 to Paris" without bells and whistles, choosing an uncomplicated approach and a low budget look that ultimately celebrates "the ordinary" by contrasting it with the extraordinary actions of a few good men. The cinematography has the quality of an iPhone but it seems deliberate. There is nothing in the film to detract from the story of these heroes. It's as if Eastwood told them to forget the cameras and just be themselves. They are pretty good and believable as first-time actors.

Three young American men backpacking through Europe were on the train: Alek Skarlatos (himself), Anthony Sadler (himself), and Spencer Stone (himself). They had casually moved up into first class for better Wi-Fi access. Spencer had fallen asleep but was awakened by the sound of gunfire and people screaming. Their actions, and that of a Briton (Chris Norman) and two others, saved the lives of over 500 people who were traveling on the train.

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Sr. Nancy Usselmann, left, talks to Spencer Stone. Next to him are, from left, Anthony Sadler, Alek Skarlatos and Sr. Rose Pacatte. (Michael Collins)

The three young men became friends in the eighth grade when they all attended the same small, private Christian school in Sacramento. Alek (Bryce Gheisar) lived with his mom Heidi (Jenna Fischer) and Spencer (William Jennings) lived next door with his mom, Joyce (Judy Greer). The mothers soon became close friends. Anthony, who is African American, (Paul-Mikél Williams) lives in a nearby suburb. The kids bond over mischief and discipline issues at school and the war games that Spencer and Alek love to play in the woods on the weekends. Spencer has an astonishing amount of play guns that look real. Anthony is shocked when Spencer covers his bed with his collection. When Spencer brings out a real hunting rifle he is surprised that Anthony has never seen an actual rifle before, surprised that black people do not go hunting.

Even though the boys don't follow rules very well, they do listen to their teachers at times. One day their history teacher, Garrett Walden (Jaleel White) challenges them to do as the historic figures they studied, who acted when they had to. "What would you do, if it were you? Would you be ready to act?"

The boys soon split up. Alek goes to live with his dad in Oregon, and Anthony goes to public school. After they graduate, Spencer decides he wants to do something to save lives and enlists in the Air Force. Because of vision issues he cannot become a medic and instead becomes a specialist in survival, evasion, resistance and escape. He buffs up physically and learns wrestling and martial arts. Alek joins the National Guard and ends up in Afghanistan doing base security and is extremely bored. Anthony is in college. Spencer organizes a summer reunion trip through Europe, meeting Anthony in Venice and Alek in Germany where he has gone to meet a former girl friend.

The three young men almost didn't go to Paris; everyone told them it wasn't so great. But they did, and their lives changed forever.



Sr. Nancy Usselmann, Clint Eastwood, Sr. Rose Pacatte (Michael Collins)

When Sr. Nancy Usselmann, a Daughter of St. Paul, and I spoke with the three young men on the red carpet before the Feb. 5 premiere in Los Angeles, they were obviously pleased to have been in the film, but they are humble, ordinary guys who seem to be getting on with life after the unexpected challenge of a lifetime.

The script is a first feature film for Dorothy Blyskal who bases it on the 2016 book *The 15:17 to Paris: The True Story of a Terrorist, a Train and Three American Heroes*, written by Stone, Sandler, Skarlatos and Jeffrey E. Stern.

Before the film, Eastwood told Sister Nancy and me, unbidden, that spirituality is revealed in the film — in fact, that Spencer would recite the peace prayer of St. Francis. I checked the book: It's not there but was something Eastwood must have added because he seemed pleased to share this with us, that it would be something we understood.

The film shows that Spencer loves guns and war games as a kid but somehow peace transcends his personality and character as he matures. Spencer, remembering something his mom told him, talks on the young men's trip through Europe about having a kind of existential feeling that they are moving toward something bigger than themselves. When Mark Moogalian is bleeding out in the train aisle, he asks if Mark would like to say a prayer. He doesn't, but this doesn't stop Spencer from using all his wits and skills to try to save Mark's life.

I was not happy with all the guns, toys or not, in the early part of the film. I suspected it was product placement for the NRA. But I checked the book and Eastwood seems to have actually shown some restraint in his depiction of the boys' obsession to play with "play" guns (as well as Airsoft guns that look like real guns and can shoot pellets) and study World War II battle plans in history class.

This is a very moving, inspirational film about goodness and being prepared to act for the common good, to choose others over self when the occasion presents itself. The film upholds the idea that character matters and that it's your intelligence and physical strength rather than guns that may well save your life. I didn't expect that message from Eastwood. He stays very close to the story of these men.

The words of French president François Hollande during a ceremony to confer the Legion of Honor on the men (and Chris Norman, a 62-year-old Briton who helped subdue the terrorist suspect) may bring you to tears: "Your heroism must be an example for many and a source of inspiration. Faced with the evil of terrorism, there is a good, that of humanity. You are the incarnation of that."

One note: I had a chance to tell Eastwood that since the age of eight I had wanted to meet Rowdy Yates (his character in the television show "Rawhide"), and now I had. He smiled.

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Official Trailer for "The 15:17 to Paris" on YouTube by Warner Bros.