

'Only the Brave' harrowing true tale of firefighters

The wildfires that have raged across the western U.S. add a sobering element to "Only the Brave," a true story about the Granite Mountain Hotshots, a local firefighting crew.

The Arizona-based unit fought and lobbied for the privilege of putting themselves on the frontline of such perilous situations as "Hotshots" -- an unprecedented honor for a local crew -- which involves using controlled burns to establish borders and thus save towns and property from devastation.

Based on a GQ article, the story's basic elements center around two very familiar movie themes, wrapped up in "Top Gun"-style posing with shirts off, as young guys who bravely enter harm's way haze each other, adopt colorful nicknames and otherwise seek outlets to let off steam. (Director Joseph Kosinski has likened the film to a war movie where the enemy is fire, which feels about right.)

Leading it all is Eric Marsh (Josh Brolin, looking particularly burly), the 40-something papa bear to a gang that primarily consists of 20-somethings. His determination to win the respect they deserve not only means rushing into danger but placing work ahead of his wife (Jennifer Connelly), no matter how much he adores her. It's a commitment all the Hotshots make, in part because Eric demands nothing less.

Into this tight-knit community comes Brendan McDonough (Miles Teller), a recovering drug addict determined to clean himself up now that he's accidentally become a father. Brendan is viewed skeptically by the rank and file -- especially Chris MacKenzie (Taylor Kitsch) -- but Eric agrees to take a chance on him.

What follows thus turns into a kind of classic basic-training yarn, played out against the backdrop of various fires that the group has to battle -- first to prove its worth, later as a badge of that hard-won right. As directed by Kosinski ("Tron: Legacy"), those scenes are impressively harrowing, but have a certain repetitive quality -- at least for anyone who's seen "Backdraft" -- until the film reaches its final acts.

The performances are almost uniformly strong, if somewhat curtailed by the familiarity of the character notes, from Brolin's tough-love routine to Teller's attempts

to weather the rigors of the job and prove himself to his skeptical mates. By that measure, Kitsch is generally the most fun as the group's incorrigible prankster and ladies' man, whose relationship with Brendan becomes oddly endearing.

As noted, the distracting aspect of all this is the outbreak of terrible wildfires, which brings additional urgency to this story that made headlines in 2013. Otherwise, "Only the Brave" works as a personal portrait of those trained to rush toward danger, without quite reaching the level that would warrant an unqualified endorsement to rush out to see it.