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Director Zwick defies the typical WWII film

By Anthony Breznican, USA TODAY

LOS ANGELES — It all started with little boys playing war.

REVIEW: [War drama 'Defiance' meets with resistance](#)

In the late 1950s, Edward Zwick was a little boy running around his suburban Chicago neighborhood with friends, pretending to fight the Axis powers like the heroic soldiers or flying aces from their favorite World War II movies.

"Gregory Peck seemed to star in all of them — *12 O'Clock High*, *The Guns of Navarone*," says Zwick, now 56, who grew up to become the director of *Glory*, *Legends of the Fall*, *The Last Samurai* and *Blood Diamond*. "But," he adds, "to be a Jewish kid was to hear other stories ..."

Those were about the Holocaust, and Zwick was secretly troubled by the all-too-easy question kids often ask, which has a million hard answers: Why didn't they fight back?

"You try to reconcile the difference between the stories you heard about the victimization of people like you, and then these other heroes," he says of the screen fighters he idolized. "It had some kind of pain attached to it, really."

He has finally gotten to tell his own story of tough, fighting Jews, and he did it with the help of 007.

Daniel Craig took the lead role in Zwick's *Defiance*, which expands nationwide today, as one of four Jewish brothers who lead fellow refugees into the forests of Eastern Europe to wage guerrilla war on the Nazis and their supporters.

With *Casino Royale* and *Quantum of Solace* making him an international star, Craig wanted to play an action hero who was based in reality and not just an elaborate fantasy.

"The reality of the story is so much wilder than we could ever really portray," Craig says, sitting with Zwick for an interview at Los Angeles' Museum of Tolerance, a Holocaust history center. "I read and reread the continuing struggle of these people, and it is like a kind of adventure story. They survived, on the run, and the German army was sent in to dig them out, and they escaped."

Hundreds of refugees, old and young, sick and healthy, survived in the woods in makeshift shelters for two years while the elder Bielski brothers — played by Craig, Liev Schreiber and Jamie Bell — kept order among the group, raided area farms for food and led strikes on Nazi-aligned authorities.

"They weren't prepared for this. No one was prepared for this, but they were prepared for action," Craig

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says of the Bielskis. "They were tough guys, in trouble with the law constantly, and they got their own backs. Whenever anybody locally double-crossed them, they took retribution. So once the event happened, they were prepared."



Zwick became aware of the story in 1995 when one of the brothers died of old age and an obituary recounting their struggle ran in *The New York Times*, which led him to a deeper chronicle of the story in the book *Defiance* by Nechama Tec.

Years later, persuading Hollywood studios to make the film proved fruitless, but prospects improved after Craig joined the cast, and Zwick was able to pay for the \$30 million project by selling international rights in advance.

The little boy from Winnetka, Ill., finally had his Jewish war movie.

It's one that people such as Mitch Braff are happy to see. He runs JewishPartisans.org, which shares the stories of those who resisted, and he says that because *Defiance* is a David-vs.-Goliath-style action movie starring an A-list actor, it will go a long way toward engaging students.

"We're very excited. As a small, educational non-profit, we never dreamed to reach so many people," Braff says. "Non-Jewish kids say they have more respect for Jews after they see this film, and Jewish kids have a sense of pride and strength that their people were able to fight back."

As Craig and Zwick walk through the corridors of the Museum of Tolerance, flanked on all sides by video displays about American G.I.s who liberated concentration camps and non-Jews who hid refugees or helped them escape, they come to a basement-level display that is a full-scale re-creation of the entrance to one of the camps.

A hush falls over them, and they walk through the rest of the exhibit as if in a holy place. Despite all their work making their own full-scale camps in the forests of Lithuania for the movie, the actor and director acknowledge being humbled by the reality of what they were portraying.

Though many survived under the protection of Craig's character, Tuvia, it came at a cost.

"The basics of life, getting up, washing, eating. If you get that right, you can survive for months. But can you imagine things like cholera got around a camp like that? These are weak people, mostly old people, and young people," Craig says. "You just think, 'How in the hell did they keep that together?'" The truth of it was, he ruled it with an iron fist, and the stories about him executing people or getting rid of people are frighteningly true."

For all the historical significance, Zwick acknowledges the story comes back to something very simple, a kind of primal urge of fight or flight — or both.

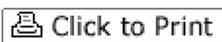
"The impulse to survive is this undeniable thing," he says, noting similar stories, both real and fantasized. "It's in Robin Hood, it's in the Brothers Grimm. The woods are always a place of transformation in literature. It's where you go, where the lovers go, where the madmen goes to be away from society and be safe or be changed."

Craig says the Bielskis' success may have partly come from playing war as children, just as Craig and Zwick did as boys — though the Bielskis' backyard had been the dense Belorussian forest.

"They knew it like the back of their hand," Craig says. "They had grown up in those forests, and anybody who followed them in would get lost because they could lead them anywhere they wanted. It was a place of security, after all the devastation."

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