'Zero Dark Thirty' is visceral, tense, phenomenal

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From voices crying out in terror on Sept. 11, 2001, to SEAL Team Six sifting through computer hard drives and a Central Intelligence Agency operative confirming his identity, “Zero Dark Thirty” is a tense, heart-pounding and thrilling look at the search for Osama bin Laden.

Director **Kathryn Bigelow’s** film opens with its disclaimer, “based on first-hand accounts,” and shifts to a haunting sequence of 911 calls from people inside the World Trade Center on Sept. 11. Anyone who experienced that day will immediately have the myriad of feelings they’ve had over the past 10 years resurface, which is exactly what makes “Zero Dark Thirty” so compelling.

Cut to CIA operatives Maya (**Jessica Chastain**) and Dan (**Jason Clarke**) as they interrogate a suspected Al Qaeda agent in Pakistan. It’s brutal, humiliating and in-your-face. Dan has done this all before. He wholly believes in his mission, to bring justice, his means are completely justified.

In the back of the room, Maya is tentative, it’s her first interrogation. She can barely watch; she struggles with Dan’s order to get a bucket of water for a round of water boarding.

The film follows Maya, based on a real CIA operative still undercover, who finds a small lead to the whereabouts of bin Laden, and she is 100 percent certain that lead is the best they will ever get to finding him. The film is 10 years of terrorist attacks around the world, CIA failings, lost suspects, dead ends and tragedies that culminated on May 2, 2011.

Chastain is brilliant. Maya undergoes a transformation from the squeamish first-timer in the Pakistani torture scene to a “killer” as her superiors describe her. She becomes adept at manipulating detainees, sifting through the mysteries of the terror network and after losing friends and colleagues, a storm brews within her that explodes into a fury when she and her team finds the Abbottabad compound.

“Zero Dark Thirty” is not a documentary, but there is no Hollywood here. This is not “Argo” where the ending of that film was untrue, but incredible movie-making to create unbelievable tension. Bigelow is masterful at creating tension without sacrificing the truth. This isn’t a film about waving the flag, there’s no romance—nothing develops to distract its characters from their purpose.

There are no politics.

Despite current controversy over the issue of torture leading to intelligence about bin Laden’s whereabouts, the scenes of torture fit the narrative of America post 9/11. The CIA operatives and higher ups complain to political officials in President Barack Obama’s administration make it clear that America does not torture.

This film is an image of “big breaks and the little people that make them happen” according to CIA operative Jessica (**Jennifer Ehle**), who works with Maya. It’s a look into the people who spent 10 searching for one man, and failing.

The look into the process and the headaches and physical toll the search took on so many people who were so devoted to exacting revenge for 9/11 and finding some semblance of justice for those responsible is fascinating.

Maya's physical appearance bears the weight of her failings and the dead ends she and her team constantly meet. Dan becomes jaded and can't take the interrogations anymore and puts in for a desk job at the CIA headquarters in Virginia.

But none of them waver, despite having to spent over 120 days convincing CIA director Leon Panetta, played here by a tough **James Gandolfini**, that the Abbottabad compound is where bin Laden is living, despite not being able to prove it.

The film peels back the layers of emotions that every American experienced at one point or another in the past 10 years and is relatable to anyone who lived it, even though we aren't CIA operatives, their drive and their mission is one we all shared, despite whether we agreed with certain methods being used.

Once the raid on the compound is launched, Bigelow creates the most nerve-shattering tension I've seen in a film in a long time. We know the outcome, but "Zero Dark Thirty" drops you into the compound from the classified stealth helicopters with the SEALs.

Through handheld camerawork and hazy, green night vision, you see what they saw. You move with them over their shoulder, you feel the adrenaline and fear what lurks around every corner. Every shot fired through silenced weapons hits your ears, the echo bouncing off the concrete walls and hitting you in the chest.

Maya confirms the identity of bin Laden after the raid. She heads home, alone on a cargo plane in an emotional and painfully beautiful close up. The relief, pain and catharsis are real, but with tears, you can feel the confusion, celebrating what was accomplished but wondering how anything really changed.

"Zero Dark Thirty" puts you on the ground, in the offices, the detainee cells wrapped in barbed wire, in the helicopter and finally, in the bedroom where blood stains a carpet where bin Laden was photographed seconds before by a SEAL to record his identity.

It's a phenomenal achievement, one that shouldn't be mired by political feelings. Bigelow and

screenwriter **Mark Boal** deserve praise for a pulse-pounding thriller that hits close to home.

It is an absolute crime that Bigelow was not nominated for an Academy Award for Best Director.

“Zero Dark Thirty” is unbelievable.

‘Zero Dark Thirty’ is now playing and is rated ‘R’ with a runtime of 2 hours 37 minutes.

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