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MOVIE REVIEW | 'A MARINE STORY'

A Stoic Marine Undone by Don't Ask, Don't Tell

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

You could bounce quarters off the taut abdominals of Alexandra Everett (Dreya Weber), the blond, self-assured protagonist of Ned Farr's film "A Marine Story." A Marine major who has served four deployments in Iraq, Alexandra is first seen returning to her hometown in the California desert in the summer of 2008 and briskly walking the 10 miles from the train station to the house where she grew up.

We learn, bit by bit, mostly through flashbacks, that Alexandra, who is married to a serviceman, is a casualty of the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy. E-mails sent to her by another woman, implying a homosexual relationship, were discovered on a computer at her military base. And Alexandra, vigorously denying any sexual activity while in the service, must choose between a hearing to prove that contention and an honorable discharge. Because she is gay and closeted, she reluctantly leaves the service, with no idea what to do with the rest of her life. But she is more stoic than bitter.

Ms. Weber (Mr. Farr's wife) anchors the movie with a gritty, honest performance that has the same to-the-bone quality as Melissa Leo's in "Frozen River." There's not a false note or inflection.

Alexandra passionately loved military life, and as she walks around the town she hears military marches in her head.

Adrift, she overindulges her fondness for tequila and reconnects with old friends while keeping her secret from all but one. Alexandra's composure crumbles when that friend takes her to women's night at a local bar and she is terrified of being discovered.

The town, plagued by a crystal meth epidemic, has gone downhill. Early in the story, when Alexandra helps apprehend a drug-addicted couple caught shoplifting, the sheriff gives the 20-year-old woman, Saffron Snow (Paris Pickard), a choice between prison and the military. Then he suggests that Alexandra take Saffron under her wing and prepare her for boot camp. She agrees.

Fiercely defiant at the outset, Saffron gains self-esteem from the grueling physical rituals Alexandra puts her through, and they form a deepening mentor-protégé bond that (thank Heaven) doesn't take the path toward awakening romance.

Pungent set pieces include a barroom arm-wrestling match in which Alexandra defeats local louts, who are certain (as one sneers) that "the strongest woman is equal to the weakest man." That contest ends in a drunken brawl. A raucous game of paint ball conveys the rugged camaraderie of these tough small-town residents.

One of the losers in the arm-wrestling match is a vindictive meth addict who takes such offense that he stalks Alexandra and surreptitiously snaps pictures of her kissing a woman she meets during her foray into lesbian nightlife. It is the first sign that the movie is losing its footing.

"A Marine Story," which won the best United States feature award at the Outfest in Los Angeles, finally topples over with a violent showdown in a meth lab that arrives out of the blue and feels tacked on. Until it loses its balance, the film is as trusty and upstanding as its protagonist, who is given to pithy one liners like "Marines don't cry; their eyeballs sweat."

My favorite — "Failure ain't the falling down; it's the staying down" — describes exactly who Alexandra is.

A MARINE STORY

Opens on Friday in Manhattan.

Written, directed and edited by Ned Farr; director of photography, Alexandre Naufel; music by Craig Richey; production design by Michael Fitzgerald; costumes by Wendy Range Rao; produced by J D Disalvatore, Dreya Weber and Mr. Farr. At the Quad Cinema, 34 West 13th Street, Greenwich Village. Running time: 1 hour 33 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Dreya Weber (Alexandra Everett), Paris Pickard (Saffron Snow), Anthony Michael Jones (Leo), Christine Mourad (Holly), Deacon Conroy (Burner), Gregg Daniel (Sheriff Wolcott), Troy Ruptash (Joe) and Jeff Sugarman (Pollard).