

'Thirteen Lives' lets Thai cave rescue story unfold naturally

By Adam Graham

The Detroit News

Ron Howard, good ol' Ron Howard, is back in sturdy form with "Thirteen Lives," a tense, nervy procedural thriller based on the 2018 incident in which a youth soccer team and its coach were saved from a flooded cave in Thailand while the world watched on breathlessly from afar.

Howard's film is unflashy and dismisses Hollywood fireworks in its depiction of the painstaking step-by-step process of the high-risk mission and evacuation. Real-life heroes don't come with capes or slow-motion entrances, and neither do the brave men in Howard's grounded, solid telling.

A group of boys is playing soccer one afternoon, and after practice (and before one of their birthday parties, which will include a SpongeBob SquarePants birthday cake), they make a stop at the Tham Luang Nang Non cave, in northern Thailand's Tham Luang-Khun Nam Nang Non Forest Park.

It's June 2018, and monsoon season is still a month off. But a sudden flash of unexpected rains falls quick and hard and floods huge portions of the cave, trapping the 12 boys and their coach deep inside.

Once it's determined the boys are missing — their bicycles are found at the



Metro Goldwyn Mayer Pictures

Viggo Mortensen, left, Joel Edgerton, Tom Bateman, Colin Farrell and Thiraphat "Tui" Sajakul portray cave divers in "Thirteen Lives."

'THIRTEEN LIVES'

MPAA rating: PG-13 (for some strong language and unsettling images)

Running time: 2:27

How to watch: Prime Video

entrance of the cave — a rescue mission is convened. Teams attempt to pump

water out from inside, but it's still pouring in from the mountain above. Navy SEALs are brought in to try to explore the caves underwater, but there's little visibility or maneuverability inside, as strong currents and sharp corners in the twists and turns add to the peril of the situation. And no one even knows if anyone inside is alive.

A team of international cave divers arrives on the scene, including James

Volanthen (Colin Farrell) and Rick Stanton (Viggo Mortensen). They're faced with opposition from local forces, including the SEALs who don't want outside help to save their own.

Plus Rick is torn over his own involvement in the rescue. "I don't even like kids," he grouches.

But it's James and Rick who dive farther into the cave than anyone before them, and who eventually discover the boys, miraculously alive, and awaiting rescue. But how to get them out? It takes expert level divers to get through the five-and-a-half hour dive, and with more rains on the way, there's no time to lose. Meanwhile families, authorities and teams of volunteers are gathered outside the cave, as the incident captures the attention of the world over a period of nearly three weeks.

You likely remember the incident from the news, and it's already been the subject of several documentaries, including 2019's "The Cave" and 2021's "The Rescue." "Thirteen Lives" is a catch-all dramatization for those who haven't seen the previous projects, and it's so down the middle that it often plays like a documentary. (Farrell and Mortensen play their exceptionally talented divers like a couple of average Joes.)

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