Lack of spirit leaves World War II saga hanging midway

CHENNAI: Movies on World War II have delighted cinema audiences for years. Nobody can forget the daring Allied escape in the 1965 “Von Ryan’s Express” with Frank Sinatra and Trevor Howard driving a train through Nazi-occupied territory.

There were others in that decade and earlier such as David Lean’s “The Bridge on the River Kwai” about British prisoners of war building a railway in malaria-infested Burma (now Myanmar). These were great classics, but recent efforts have not been as memorable.
Roland Emmerich’s just-opened “Midway” comes nowhere close to the 1950s and 1960s war adventures. Despite audiences still being thirsty for WWII sagas and a star-studded cast (Patrick Wilson, Woody Harrelson, Mandy Moore, Ed Skrein and Nick
Jonas), the film is unmoving, mainly because of the shallow characters. If the dialogues are stiff, the dramatic potential – including the relationship among the men – appears to have been left midway.

The film begins with Japan’s December 1941 air attack on the US naval base in Pearl Harbor, Honolulu, which dragged America into the conflict, and the flick follows America’s revenge mission culminating in the June 1942 Battle of Midway.

For the US, it was a victory against all odds giving them control of the Pacific’s Midway atoll. It was also a major triumph of human spirit, but the film does not quite capture it.

Most of the exploits relate to real-life fighter pilot Dick Best (Skrein), whose devil-may-care attitude earns him the title “cowboy.” His wife Ann (Moore), the only female character, urges him on but seems a washed-out figure. However, there is plenty of action in the air with dog fights, bombings and pilots ejecting from burning planes high above the ground.
For fans of singer Jonas, his small but significant part may appeal. He is sailor Bruno Gaido whose spontaneous and heroic action during a Japanese raid earns him promotion.

“Midway” plays at three levels, including one about Japanese military officers, and was shot in Hawaii and Montreal with a lot of computer graphics thrown in. The camera work (Robby Baumgartner) is impressive, but somewhere the soul is missing, and the characters fail to come across as real people.

Despite this, the film opened atop the North American box office last weekend with a reported $17.5 million in ticket sales.