

# Despite Rihanna, Peter Berg’s ‘Battleship’ Lands as One of the Best Popcorn Flicks Ever

Submitted by [HollywoodChicago.com](http://www.hollywoodchicago.com) [1] on May 18, 2012 - 1:01am

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CHICAGO – “Battleship” certainly could simplistically be reduced to a 131-minute propaganda piece of why you might want to enlist in the U.S. Navy – that is, if Earth had to ward off lizard-like creatures from a deep-space solar system we can only reach by slingshotting a highly amplified “What’s up, aliens?” broadcast to them.

And “Battleship,” which is rock-concert loud and lacks in strategically placed comedy, definitely will regret going down in history as being the first to offer the already rich, famous and slutty singer Rihanna a wasted, feature-film launching pad when she – like many other musicians before her (read: Britney, Mariah, etc.) – should simply stick to singing and (pole) dancing.



Alien invaders attack a naval ship in “Battleship”.  
Image credit: ILM/Universal Pictures

Thanks to “Battleship,” Rihanna has already been cast in 2013’s “The End of the World” with Seth Rogen and may even appear in 2013’s “The Fast and the Furious 6”. (We *seriously* need as many “Fast and Furious” films as “Star Wars” movies?) The “Battleship” camera – helmed by director Peter Berg (“Hancock” and the upcoming “Hancock 2”) – fears leaving it on her for more than a second and winces at giving her more than a few words to speak. Clearly she’s a blockbuster miscast.







Brooklyn Decker as Sam Shane in "Battleship".  
*Photo credit: Frank Masi*

But U.S. Navy and Rihanna aside, "Battleship" succeeds where it absolutely must: in the department of unadulterated entertainment, special effects and just plain popcorn-flick fun. While popcorn flicks like "300," "Transformers," "Terminator," "Predator," "Iron Man" and "Die Hard" are notoriously known for being a monumentally entertaining waste of time, "Battleship" fits the grouping with one exception: at least some semblance of a script to make all the ass kicking make sense.

The film's story, which is based on the classic Hasbro naval combat game of the same name, takes Jodie Foster's "Contact" to a whole new level. Aliens in "Contact" – communicating through satellites – give humans the coded schematics to build a machine that whizzes across space and time for Earth's first rendezvous with little green men. "Battleship" begins the same way – with amplified satellites – but then brings the aliens in the reverse direction: to Earth.

Though the plot fails to ever reveal exactly what the aliens want (except for the desire to hijack our satellites and tell more to come to Earth) – perhaps for tea time or to nosh on our planet's delicious bagels and baklava? – the story's most redeeming quality is its ability to bring a classic board game's "quadrant" combat strategy onto the big screen in an old-fashioned while also high-tech fashion.

Also, these writers even tactfully avoid the Hollywood cheese of having to script the line "You've sunk my battleship" by writing it into a nostalgic character who instead says: "You're not going to sink *this* battleship."



Taylor Kitsch (left) and Rihanna try to decipher a strange reading in "Battleship".  
*Image credit: Universal Pictures*

"Battleship," which has an estimated \$209 million budget and is written by the brotherly duo Jon Hoeber and Erich Hoeber (also the co-writers of Bruce Willis' "Red" and Kate Beckinsale's "Whiteout"), makes the crackerjack move of bridging the American and Japanese naval warfare divide in a way that makes you feel like you've just learned the secret of the American defeat by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor.



In the film's best-scripted and best-acted moment, Tadanobu Asano as Captain Yugi Nagata befriends and co-strategizes with "John Carter" star Taylor Kitsch as the loose-cannoned Lieutenant Alex Hopper. Captain Nagata explains to the U.S. Navy how Japanese battleships have been "seeing" the Americans for decades even without radar.

Using U.S. plot data from the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Japanese advise the U.S. Navy – which tries to defend against lizard-like, "Iron Man"-suited aliens – to shut off their radar and instead plot NOAA buoy data. This grid, which is conveniently shaped like boxy quadrants just like in Hasbro's Battleship game, shows nearby water buoys.



Alien shredders prepare to obliterate their targets in "Battleship".

*Image credit: ILM/Universal Pictures*

Based on the principles of "water displacement" – or when nearby motion moves the buoys – the humans can see where the alien battleships are located and moving to. Then, even though firing air-strike missiles (more often used in "Battleship" than underwater torpedoes) reveal their location, the humans target quadrants – "fire on E-2!" – just like in the board game. It's an ace scripting move that successfully adapts a board game into a believable, big-screen blockbuster film.

The film's special effects – coupled with truly original and memorable weapons experts, environment masters, structural ship engineers and a new take on what aliens might look like – leave nothing to be desired and everything to enjoy. This time, our aliens – known as The Regents – are basically lizards who can't stomach our sun and need hardcore sun visors and advanced, "Predator"-like targeting systems to see.

You always have the sense the humans are unprepared, understaffed and sorely outgunned with prehistoric technology. It's human brain power – guided by wisdom from ancient Chinese military treatises from Sun Tzu such as The Art of War – that give our clunky steel a fighting chance.



An alien invader reaches for its human target in "Battleship".

*Image credit: ILM/Universal Pictures*

The ripped Taylor Kitsch appropriately fills the film's starring role while his more buttoned-up brother, Alexander Skarsgård (TV's "True Blood") as Commander Stone Hopper, attempts to whip him into shape. Former model and blonde bombshell Brooklyn Decker is formulaically scripted in as Kitsch's U.S. Navy personal trainer girlfriend. She's also, of course, the daughter of U.S. Navy Admiral Shane – played by the authoritative, fear-instilling Liam Neeson.

While Kitsch's character attempts to earn his Navy stripes, his most daunting task is asking his Navy leader's permission to marry the film's token hot chick.

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For director Peter Berg, whose Hollywood action resume leads with "Hancock" but pales in comparison to Michael Bay's "Transformers," "Pearl Harbor," "Armageddon" and "Bad Boys," "Battleship" proves that Berg is a worthy adversary as a blockbuster action director. "Battleship" raises hope for Berg's upcoming "Hancock 2" following his 2008 "Hancock," which was a critical flop but a box-office success.

*"Battleship" stars Taylor Kitsch, Rihanna, Alexander Skarsgård, Brooklyn Decker, Liam Neeson, Tadanobu Asano, Hamish Linklater, Peter MacNicol, John Tui, Jesse Plemons, Gregory D. Gadson, Jerry Ferrara, Adam Godley and Rico McClinton from director Peter Berg and writers Erich Hoeber and Jon Hoeber. The film, which has a running time of 131 minutes and opened on May 18, 2012, is rated "PG-13" for intense sequences of violence, action and destruction and for language.*



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