



Reviewing Private Ryan

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This is one of the longest reviews I wrote for the [Spielberg Film Society](#) newsletter, issue #71. I won't bother with too much of an introduction other than to say, back in 1998, I was on another assignment in my journalism career and I was stunned to hear what the filmmakers achieved with visual effects on this film. At the filmmaker's request, the studio permitted no stories covering that aspect of the production. Perhaps it was for the best, as nearly a couple of decades later this movie still packs an enormous punch.

Reviewing Private Ryan

By Joe Fordham (August 1998)

At the end of the prologue to his latest (seventeenth) feature, *Saving Private Ryan*, Spielberg brings his camera slowly in up close to the eyes of an old man in a cemetery, a solemn chilling version of the famous close up to the eyes in any one of his Indiana Jones films. But we're on different turf here. As we close in, an unsettling sound begins, crashing



waves, building to a roar as we arrive at Omaha Beach, June 6, 1944.

Landing craft doors open, soldiers pile out and start to fall, hit by bullets, blown to pieces, bodies piling up, clogging the way out, instantly reduced to a pile of carcasses in an unrelenting onslaught of firepower and noise. Their captain yells at them to climb out over the side. Bodies plummet, plume the water, some are dragged to their deaths by their heavy waterlogged

equipment, some are pierced by bullets. Blood starts to fill the water.

Twenty-five minutes follow of the most riveting, unrelenting, terrifying carnage that just keeps coming at you. Advance word from studio previews warned us this was coming, every TV movie critic talks about it, every newspaper write-up tries to put it into words. You have to see it, feel it thundering at you, to really appreciate the sheer ferocity of its cinematic power. It's an incredible achievement, one of those moments when a movie stops being a movie and grips you so completely that you are transported inside the moment, experiencing it first hand.

Spielberg has made mention of his choice of hand-held camera to place you the audience right in the action, using de-saturated colors, uncoated lenses with a forty-five degree wide-open shutter to give that pixilated look of the old 1940's Bell and Howell combat camera — but it's thrown together so seamlessly and passionately on screen you're not noticing technique. And it resonates for the duration of the film to follow.

Once the smoke starts to clear and you get your first look back at the beach with the two leading Toms (Hanks as Captain Miller, and Sizemore as his Sergeant), you're never settled and always on your guard because the violence is real — sudden, shocking, unpredictable — anyone could go next.

The story (by Robert Rodat) carries you through, from this opening crescendo through nervous set pieces that build again to an explosive finale. The tension is undercut with humor and performances that seem more like behavior than acting — particularly Hanks, who carries the weight of the war and the ninety men who have died under his command, without cynicism or any pyrotechnics of emotion. Camera work (Janusz Kaminski) is raw. Cutting (Michael Kahn), production design (Tom Sanders) and score (John Williams) are mood, color, timbre. They're there to serve their purpose, to tell the story and make the 170 minutes fly by.



Williams gets to eulogize the theme only in the closing credits, orchestrated in a horn and trumpet "Hymn to the Fallen," which might be, as Spielberg points out in the soundtrack album liner notes, a tribute to "the fallen of this war and possibly all wars." The soundtrack to a Spielberg/Williams collaboration can often be a key to experiencing the movie. Spielberg says he and Williams both elected to let the artillery barrage play center stage over the musical accompaniment. The music does not sound like a score to a typical action war movie. It's more like taps, a memorial to tragedy and chaos; music to underscore the



dread of going into battle. It's music to underscore the life being squeezed from screaming, bleeding infantrymen. Music as Captain Miller takes up his shovel to bury the dead.

But *Saving Private Ryan* is not angry or morose. It's a quest, the "mission of man." When Captain Miller is presented with the details of his next assignment, his head still ringing from

the carnage on Omaha Beach, he passes this off as a public relations exercise and goes about assembling what remains of his best men. Miller doesn't question his orders, they come from the Chief of Staff. His platoon takes the idea less happily — particularly the hard-boiled Brooklyn skeptic Private Reiben (Ed Burns), who balks at the math: Where is the logic in eight men going to save one?

Corporal Upham (Jeremy Davies) serves as our common man, Spielberg's foil to address all the obvious questions. He's a naïve ingenué of war, never having fired a gun in combat, brought along as the only available (the only living) German-speaking member of the division. Spielberg first plays him for humor. Upham tries to bring his typewriter along, Hanks knocks the machine out of his hands and presents him with a pencil. As they hit the road, Upham can barely hold his rifle straight, trying to pal around with his shell-shocked buddies. But there are no easy answers here. The other guys in the platoon all hate him. Hanks is no friendlier. He's closed off, clearly educated, but he's a battered soul and won't let on where he's from.

If traditionally you'd expect this part of a war movie to be the part where you get to know the men one by one before they're heroically bumped off, Spielberg plays on these expectations and uses them to create extreme unease. You're constantly aware that any one of these guys could get killed and there will not be a warning. Without heavy symbolism and speech making, we're constantly confronted with the futility and fear of the destruction all around.



An especially harrowing episode occurs when the platoon comes across a hidden enemy

radar transmitter. They could easily go around it, no one wants to arbitrarily risk his neck; they're all on such a futile mission why should they bother? Hanks will not relent; they have a job to do, to win the war. He pushes them forward. Upham hangs back, bringing up the rear. He watches, paralyzed with fear, as Hanks and company take on the German gun emplacement. A death in the platoon provides an angry confrontation with a surviving German. Do they shoot him? Do they let him go? The men start to fight amongst themselves and the hopelessness of their situation almost breaks apart the platoon. Captain Miller's actions turn the scene around, and brings the only answer: it's a choice of fighting to live or giving in to chaos.

It's a choice that Spielberg introduces earlier in the film, in a brilliantly visual sequence that is difficult to do justice by putting into words. When we cut away from the dead in the breakwater on Omaha Beach, we cut to a room full of clattering typewriters, a secretary picks up one letter, then another, then another and brings them to her superior; three



telegrams due to go back home to Mrs. Ryan, informing her that three of her four sons have been killed in action. Cut to the top brass in the office of the U.S. Army Chief of Staff. How are they going to handle this? A mission to save one soldier seems insane. General Marshall (Harve Presnell) turns to an old letter for his answer, and in an unbroken speech, he quotes Abraham Lincoln: how do you quantify the value

of a human life? Cut to Mrs. Ryan (Amanda Boxer) washing dishes back home. The government car pulls up, the old lady greets the officers at the door. In a shot reminiscent of John Ford, Mrs. Ryan is seen from behind in silhouette looking out. She sees the officers approach and simply crumples without a word. It's a visual statement, very powerful, doesn't hang around.

Other images linger, making their point in a visual way: Sergeant Horvath on Omaha Beach fills a ration can with French soil, and adds it to the collection in his bag "Italy", "Africa", etc. We instantly understand the war-ravaged look in his eyes. Another where Miller's men start walking, crossing the green fields of France, hold on a leaf, it's hit by a drop of rain, more sprinkles on the grass, other leaves are pelted, puddles form in the mud, then boots come crashing down and we're in a downpour amidst the chaos of a bombed-out sniper situation. Another where the platoon arrive at a medical camp to search for Ryan and start merrily to tear through a bag of dog tags, hundreds of them like a stash of poker chips, while a battalion of wounded airmen start to walk by, gaping. Great, powerful visual moments.

Spielberg also finds a place for humor shortly after this dog tag scene, where Private Mellish (Adam Goldberg) taunts a passing group of Germans, holding out his Star of David, happily chanting "Juden, Juden..." No comment needed here, but it's a witty nod to *Schindler*.

Miller's sniper, Private Jackson (Barry Pepper), also has his moments. A Southern Boy and a dead-eye crack shot, we first meet him in the horror of the Normandy landing in a scene that becomes his signature. Whenever he takes aim, all sound fades away and he prays a breathless prayer for his shot to ring true -- blam! -- he gets another -- blam! -- another. It's a religious act that gives him an invulnerability you don't completely trust but cling to nonetheless in the bedlam.



There's no doubt though that Hanks' Captain Miller is the center of the piece. When Miller hits the sand at Omaha and comes up in a daze, we're submerged with him in the horror of the scene: the roar of battle literally stops in an adrenalized blanket of muffled quiet and we can only sit and watch with him -- What's that guy looking for over there in the sand? Oh, he's only got one arm. Oh, he's found it, what is that, all limp and white? Oh, it's his other arm. Off he goes -- sand is flying, faces yelling, mute. Finally someone shakes him out of it. Who's in charge here? He is. It occurs again later in the movie. We don't quite know what's happening; we just know there's no way out but to push on. Terrified, Miller can't understand why his hand will suddenly start shaking of its own accord. We do. It's the first we see of him in the movie, the close-up of his shaking hand. Miller carries the film, carries the war for his men. He lets down his guard at one crucial moment, but would rather crawl away and hunker in a crater than show the remnants of the man inside. Not even Private Ryan gets to see that face.



The mission takes on new significance when Miller and his men finally find Ryan (Matt Damon). Here again, Spielberg pulls the rug: when we least expect it, there he is, it's him, this mythic figure they've been hunting all this

time. Miller's men look on disbelieving. They were all expecting an asshole, and of course, the kid is shaken up to hear all three of his brothers are dead, but none of them expected he would not want to leave. Like the scene at the radar station, the situation takes on more significance than anyone expects. If Ryan's survival seemed to Miller "the only good thing we can take out of this whole godawful shitty mess," Ryan's unwillingness to abandon his only remaining "brothers" at their crumbling outpost mitigates what started as a purely noble act, turning their pointless mission into a real defensive stand. They can make a difference here, or leave. They're all terrified, but choose to stay and fight.

Sound again sets up the final sequence. Like the T-Rex footfall in *Jurassic Park*, a deep growling roar begins almost subliminally, then slowly builds. When the war machines appear, they take on a personality of their own. Ever since *Duel*, Spielberg has been able to imbue a visceral animation into inanimate things. It works here to great effect. Panzer and Tiger tanks come lurching into view over piles of rubble like living prehistoric creatures.

Miller and company are hopelessly outnumbered and quickly devastated, while all the time you see what you normally don't expect to see; there's a person there one minute and then they're suddenly in pieces. This is what it feels like to be fighting for your life. A new reality applies. Nothing makes sense, fear completely paralyses; courage or salvation may simply never come.

When Miller admits he feels every time he kills it's taking him further from home, it's a portentous statement that does not pay off until the movie's end. The act of saving



Private Ryan is only finally achieved by intervention from left field. Miller won't give up, but he can only stare. We've seen the utmost cruelty played out by blood-crazed vengeful U.S. troops, moral principles are betrayed, leadership undermined, cowardice win out; but *Saving Private Ryan* concludes with a plea for what is right and humane, to make it all make sense.

If *1941* gave us war as a comic book in 1979, *Empire of the Sun* brought it to us as a hallucinatory tale of loss of innocence in 1987, and *Schindler's List* showed us a naked story of deliverance in 1993, *Saving Private Ryan* is an unrelenting tale of men stripped bare, on a quest for whatever humanity they can find. Ending where he began in a Normandy cemetery, Spielberg asks us to remember -- as in *Schindler* -- the sadness and loss, to make it all make sense. *Private Ryan* is photo-real, hyper-charged, an intimate story on an epic scale. There will be other war movies, surely, but Spielberg has succeeded here. This will be a film hard to forget.

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[< previous](#)

[next >](#)

