Saving Private Ryan

Director: Steven Spielberg
Tom Hanks: Captain John H. Miller
Tom Sizemore: Technical Sergeant Mike Horvath

Plot Synopsis

An old man visits the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial in apparently current day where he collapses in front of a grave, weeping. Cut to OMAHA Beach D-Day on Captain John H. Miller, an Army Ranger Captain who is an everyman thrown into the extreme situation excels. After surviving D-Day he is tasked with the mission to retrieve Private First Class James Francis Ryan after his three older brothers, his only siblings, are Killed In Action (KIA). He is relieved of command of his company to lead a squad consisting of Technical Sergeant Horvath, his Senior Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO), as well as Private First Class Richard Reiben (BAR gunner), Private Daniel Jackson (sniper), Private Stanley “Fish” Mellish (Jewish rifleman), Private First Class Adrian Caparzo (rifleman), Corporal Timothy E. Upham (cartographer and interpreter), and Technician Fourth Grade Irwin “Doc” Wade (medic). The squad moves to out to Neuville to meet up with the 101st Airborne Division, which Ryan is assigned to. After Caparzo is shot and killed by a German sniper (who is in turn eliminated by Jackson), the
squad find Private James Ryan only to discover that he is not the same Ryan they are looking for. They hole up until the night in an bombed out church where Miller and Horvath discuss sacrifice and how much a life is worth, as well as going into Miller’s occasionally shaking hand (which he acquired prior to the events’ of the film at Portsmouth). They move out until the reach a crashed plane and a makeshift triage site of dead and injured paratroopers as well as those deploying forward to various objectives when they come across one of Ryan’s friends’ who tells them he is in Ramelle on a mission to secure and hold the bridge. As they make their way to the bombed out city they come across a German machine gun nest that has already taken out a squad, and Miller decides to take it. In the ensuing battle Doc is mortally wounded and the surviving German soldier is forced to dig graves for all. After heated infighting among the squad regarding the mission the Captain resolves it by dissolving the mystery of his pre-war profession, humbling the squad into carrying on. When the squad reaches the town of Ramelle and discovers that Ryan refuses to leave “the only family [he] has left” Captain Miller and his squad develop a defensive strategy to repel German Forces, in which they all tragically lose their lives. Miller’s dying words are to Ryan in which he simply states “James… earn this. Earn it,” summing up the theme of earning the sacrifice of the Armed Forces, and the transference of “the shaking hand” from Miller to Ryan. The scene then dissolve’s back to the old man who is now revealed to be Ryan in present day in front of Miller’s grave where he seeks reassurance from his wife that he has “earned it.”

**Theme**

“Earn it,” our lives that we have given so that you may live.
Throughout the film Captain Miller doesn’t truly grasp why his hand tremor’s or the justification behind the mission, as it shows in his (and his squads) growing contempt for Ryan, a man that they have never met and has just lost all of his siblings. When he meets Ryan and comes to a choice it is one of his Mentors who shows him the path to enlightenment by telling him how saving Private Ryan can be the one good thing they do in this whole world. After he is mortally wounded he uses his final breaths to tell Ryan to “earn this,” earn the sacrifice he and his men have given to him, a lesson that speaks to us all as Service Member’s sacrifice everything for us and to honor them we must live fully and be good.

Symbol

The ID tags represent fallen comrades, those who have sacrificed themselves for others.

The use of ID tags goes back centuries, where soldiers would have their family name and home city written on a piece of wood or metal and generally attached to a string that is hung around the neck (Norris). ID tags are used to identify individuals, dead or alive, and assist in medical treatment or funeral rights as well as to know who to notify in case of emergency if the individual is incapacitated. In the film an ID tag is a life, if a man doesn’t have his tags on, then he has given his life for the cause.
Camera Choices in specific scene

The “Road to Neuville” scene begins at 41:41 with a long low angle shot of the squad (showing their power is a force to reckon with) coming up over a hill in the French country side with dark clouds over them, giving a sense of doom coming their way (Ruiz-Esparza 293). The scene then cuts to a profiled long shot panning right as they continue the trek to Neuville. The camera then cuts to a slightly high angle medium dolly shot (giving the sensation that the audience is walking with the squad and in the conversation) of Mellish and Upham as the latter taps the former’s shoulder to start a conversation which leads to Mellish berating him and demeaning him (Ruiz-Esparza 42). Upham attempts to begin conversation with Mellish for a second time at which point Mellish stares slowly at Upham, who then moves up to Caparzo, with the camera panning right to meet with him. It should be noted that Upham is behind Mellish and Caparzo making him appear small, weak and inferior in comparison. This is further embellished by having Upham on lower ground compared to the other two. As the sequence continues Doc comes to Upham’s right, on lower footing and speaks to him calmly and respectfully, despite the Corporal’s jittery insecurity. After the subject of Upham’s book is revealed to be about the bonds of brotherhood developed in war the squad laughs and
as Caparzo looks back to Fish with the camera in a close up on his face it cuts to a medium shot of Fish telling Upham to ask the Captain “where he is from” while Fish is walking towards the camera leading to a zooming close up dolly shot (making us feel like it’s a trap and not like Fish and Caparzo with these close-ups) (Ruiz-Esparza 39). We then cut to a slightly high angle full shot of Reiben as point man with Miller and the rest of the squad following up the hill, giving us a subtle sense of foreboding (coinciding with the initial scene establishing long shot in the beginning) for the squad, as Reiben questions the mission based off of the simple math of eight men risking their lives for one man. As the sequence continues the camera zooms out and pans left, but due to the characters movement they still go from a full shot to a medium and then a close up low angle of both Reiben and Miller as Miller asks if anyone would “like to answer that?” As Doc responds “Reiben, think about the poor bastard’s mother,” he is shown at a medium low angle. This cuts to a reverse dolly medium eye level shot of Reiben in his rebuttal with “Everyone has a mother,” as this is something that everyone can relate to in this situation, we empathize with Reiben and feel closer to him for it (Ruiz-Esparza 41). As we cut to Upham at a medium eye level he quotes “Their’s not to reason why, only to do and die.” We are quickly cut to Fish at a high angle medium shot sharing the screen with a closer eye level Caparzo, with Fish mocking Upham asking him if that means if they are supposed to die. The Captain, sensing the growing conflict, speaks with story significance for the first time in this scene as the camera cuts to him at a medium eye level shot behind Reiben (Ruiz-Esparza 41). He moves his eyes from the map to the camera as he states that “Upham’s talking about our duty as soldiers,” with the orders they receive superseding everything including their mothers. The cut to up left profile as
an eye level medium dolly shot moving with him as he smiles as thanks the Captain for defending him in this brief cut to Upham (this continues to show us that Upham is the weakest link and depends on the squad, primarily Miller, for his survival). Cutting back to Miller behind Reiben the latter asks “Even if you think the mission is FUBAR, sir?” “Especially if you think the mission is FUBAR.” Both men have subtle grins on their faces as the inside joke is said, confusing Upham as we see in the close-up eye level cut to Upham asking what it is (Ruiz-Esparza 39). This leads back to Fish and Caparzo in a now medium of Caparzo and full of Fish eye level shot as they jokingly state “oh, it's German,” keeping Upham out of the group. Cutting back to Upham with his confusion of FUBAR as he had “never heard of that.” We then cut to a medium eye level of Parker and Miller (with Parker behind the Captain) as Parker speaks for the first time in a professional and respectful manner as to how the mission is a waste while also changing the tone of the scene to a lighter one. As Miller expresses his approval of Jackson’s topic the camera pans and zooms on Parker, centering him on the shot. As the climax of his speech rings of ending the war the camera cuts to his left profile as he looks at the camera, giving us a sense of joking about the scene. Then we immediately cut to a medium shot of Reiben centered, subtly panning and zooming out to include Miller, as he asks if the Captain gripes. Miller then explains how gripes go up the chain not down and when the camera pans left and zooms to a close-up of Miller giving a satirical hypothetical to Reiben and the squad as a whole which essentially says “this is happening, might as well make the best of it.” During the speech we cut to a close up eye level of Horvath smiling because of the Reiben being put in his place, reinforcing the friction the two characters have. At the end of the Captain’s speech the dolly stops,
leaving Miller to walk out of frame, a quintessential “Mic Drop” if you will. We then cut back to Fish and Caparzo with Caparzo again closer to the camera but this time on the right of the screen and Fish to the left, with them walking side by side as they express their enjoyment of the speech and Caparzo making blowing a kiss to Fish in a joking manner. We then come to the final cut to a close-up eye level of Upham at the back of the group, smiling subtly as he begins to understand the squad’s dynamic. The close-up allows the audience to care about Upham and agree with him. The scene ends at 45:46, and while only being 04:06 long it not only establishes most of the main character’s but also their feelings on the mission, their objective, and each other. The scene is mainly filled with medium, eye level, sequenced dolly shots following the squad, which give us a sense of being with the squad and creates a bond with them, being able to relate to them in many aspects as a dysfunctional family.

**Design of Visual Elements**

I am sticking with the same scene not only because it is one of my favorites in the film, but because of why. Even though the squad jokes you feel a sense of foreboding, something bad is coming, soon. Despite of this however we feel as if we are walking with them and are involved with their conversation. It starts as the come over the hill, the dark clouds above, the wild and uneven grass on the hill, with only the squad’s silhouettes being visible. They are powerful, and mysterious, but something is coming for them, they are doomed. As the cut to the profile of the squad marching shows there are a herd of white sheep running past the group in the opposite direction that they are going. This can only represent how the purity, innocence, and safety is not only fleeing from where they are going to, but also from them individually.
They are of course dressed as American GI’s in WWII, metal helmet, light brown fatigues (helping the audience to relate to the men with natural colors and the rounded edges of the uniform, surprising considering it is a combat uniform), combat harness’ and over light brown jacket, and boot covers to prevent debris from entering their boots and socks and weapons that suit their particular role in the squad. Miller with a Thompson (Tommy Gun) to unleash power on the enemy in rapid succession (always able to solve a situation as it comes up), Reiben with the BAR to dominate the battlefield while staying mobile (the spearhead and voice of the juniors to the leadership of Horvath and Miller, a powerhouse that will survive), the Springfield with a scope for Parker to snipe from afar with precision and subtlety (a man who stays under the radar but when he speaks he is heard, no matter what is happening). The rest of the squad carry the M1 Garand, the standard issue semi-automatic service rifle of the American Armed Forces during WWII and on. This unifies this section of the group as the all-around mouthy parts of the group. They make up the majority of the dialogue and it is shown through these common props. Several of them also have specific markings on their helmets to indicate their specialty and/or rank. Captain Miller bears the twin silver bars signifying his O-3 paygrade, Doc has the Red Cross over the white square as the universal sign for medical personnel, and Upham bears a blue and white yin-yang which is his division’s insignia as required by the division. It should also be noted the subtle differences in the uniforms. Fish has a dark vest over the light brown, symbolizing the hard shell but soft center reinforced by the fact that he pushes away from Upham, who wears very light clothes all around and due to his ignorance and somewhat hollow character represents the audience as we get to know the squad. Caparzo is the opposite of Fish, he has a light green jacket over his darker brown
shirt, symbolizing that he keeps people away by bringing them in closer to trick them into thinking there is a bond, when there really is only “the bullshit.” Horvath is dressed almost the exact way with the exception of his rank and the fact that he almost always has a lip full of dip, representing his seniority and mentorship role of the squad. Doc is similar to Caparzo and Horvath however with the red cross and him being loaded with a full pack it feels as if he will take your burdens on himself, as he proves later in the film. Reiben’s light jacket is open fully showing his brown fatigues, and it screams all day long here I am, no bullshit just me, but with jokes (light jacket). He says what he thinks and doesn’t care what you think about it. Parker is fully set up light green jacket zipped up over brown fatigues and a tactical vest over it. This man is here to lay down the will of God with furious vengeance and a lot of ammo. He speaks with his rifle that is felt loud and clear no matter how far you are, hence the sole member with the Springfield. Now to the Captain, his uniform is the sharpest and most complete, everything is where it needs to be and is required to be, and yet it still feels warm and inviting with that cold authority. I would like to point out that he bears his rank on his helmet in white, where as Captain Hamill wears his in black later in the film. This is not a mistake, Miller is the White Knight, the man that stands out, up, and proud. He is our Hero. (Cole)

**Hero’s Journey – Archetype and Stage**

Captain Miller (Tom Hanks) is the Hero and his journey drives the action. He begins the film thinking only of “I” which is how he views himself and his squad and resents having to risk them all to rescue Ryan (Vogler 35). After the squad has a lead on Ryan’s location
Captain Hamill (Ted Danson) offers Miller and the squad respite at the local church. While leading them to the church Hamill in his role as Mentor tells Miller that he understands the mission and to “get Ryan home.” The Mentor is the archetype that represents the higher self, the “wiser, nobler, more god-like part of us” (Vogler 47.) Hamill is a strong leader and an honest man who Miller respects however, Miller is in disbelief and rejects the information at first (as shown in the church while speaking with Horvath and saying that he wouldn’t trade “ten Ryan’s for a single Caparzo or Vecchio”) but slowly begins to accept it as he shows mercy at the German machine gun nest (post battle) by defusing the conflict in the squad and fully at Remelle after Ryan refuses to leave his brothers in arms. The conversation between Hamill and Miller happens while the squad is in Neuville. This scene fulfills Stage Seven: Approach to the Inmost Cave. Their time in the church allows Miller time to make “final preparations for the upcoming ordeal of the adventure” (Vogler 145.) This is the quiet before the storm.

**Sound Effects**

Spielberg uses sound effects to establish the intensity of each scene, utilizing the high volume sound effects of the battlefield in conjunction with the eerie silence representing the paralyzing effect of fear in such horrors and occurs in such a fluid manner with each other that the audience does not feel confused as to why with explosions and bullets there is no sound. Nearly all of the sound effects used are combat related, from the ringing of
the ears after the concussive effect of a nearby explosion to the rolling treads of a tank conquering the rubble barricades, leading to a truly immersive cinematic experience for the audience, we feel we are in Miller’s shoes.

**Music**

The music was written by John Williams, who generally refrains from adding music during the battle scenes, instead composing somber scores for the times between. This leads the audience into a feeling of depression as death and suffering are ever present in the film. The time in between the action is when the characters and audience are able to truly feel the weight of this. Consisting of instrumentals, save for the “Tu Es Partout” and “C’ Etait Une Histoire D’Amour” played on the gramophone in Remelle as the squad await the German troops, and even this is designed to emotionally prepare the audience for what is to come.

**Editing**

Spielberg and Michael Kahn stick with cuts throughout the film save for the dissolve from Matt Damon’s young Ryan at the end of the Battle at Remelle to Harrison Young’s old Ryan at the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial to emphasize the intensity of the situation that extend to the war as a whole. The D-Day scene itself is constantly cutting from Miller on the beach to the German bunker’s view of shredding the soldiers to the dead and dying and so on. However in the relatively more peaceful settings, such as from the D-Day plus 3 scene to the field walk sequence shots are used so that we feel as if we are walking with the squad. This is one of few times when a longer cut is used because of the near constant active state that the film is in.
Göethe’s Three Questions

What was the Artist trying to do?

Mr. Spielberg was attempting to remind the world of the incredible sacrifices made by our brothers’ and sisters’ in the Armed Forces and to honor that sacrifice we must “earn it” by living our lives to the absolute fullest. He wanted to ensure that, through extreme graphical content, Americans understood that soldiers are everyday people who go into harm’s way; risking life, limb, and sanity; so that we may live in peace without having to go through any of it. As the ultimate survivors it is our duty to not only remember their sacrifices, but to earn it every day.

How well did he do it?

Undeniably amazing! Saving Private Ryan brought not only a renewed interest in WWII but also to the sacrifices that the Armed Forces make for us. Through the use of extreme graphical content and superb acting of the cast (in particular the crippling fear experienced by the D-Day soldiers), Spielberg’s masterpiece shows the physical and psychological horrors of war in one of the most realistic depictions (as stated by several veterans, myself included) ever produced. This is lauded by the genre defining special effects, the Best Director Academy Award for Spielberg, and the over $400 million profit the film accrued in the box office alone.

Was it worth doing?

Without any doubt. Due to Spielberg’s cinematic experience and not shying away from such extreme graphic content such as “pink mist” that occurs when a human is blown up with explosives or torn apart by large arms (ballistics greater than .60 caliber),
American’s have found a far greater respect for Veteran’s and their sacrifice, which for many, especially myself, has led to us living our lives to the fullest to honor their sacrifice.
Works Cited


