Tales of the 101st: Thoughts on Saving Private Ryan and Band of Brothers

Steven Spielberg said in interviews around the release of Saving Private Ryan in 1998, that his father, who had flown with the United States Army Air Force in Burma, had asked him why he hadn’t made a movie showing how the war was for people like him; Saving Private Ryan was his response, the story of a US Ranger patrol sent to rescue a US paratrooper who is now the only survivor of four brothers who have gone to war. When it was released, it was trumpeted as a new kind of war movie, such as had never been seen before. I don’t doubt Mr Spielberg’s sincerity (though I’m more wary of the Hollywood publicity machine), but to my mind the final movie fails to deliver on these promises.

Now, I don’t for a moment deny that it’s a fine piece of movie-making. The opening sequence of the landing at Omaha Beach in particular stands out as a bravura piece of cinema. It is best experienced in a Surround Sound environment, where Spielberg’s use of sound can be properly appreciated. Bullets are heard zinging behind and to the sides of the audience. This draws the audience into the action on the screen; it’s very effective in making the audience identify with the soldiers landing on Normandy, and achieving Spielberg’s object of presenting an unglamorous view of war. And one certainly can’t fault the movie for attention to detail, in getting the uniforms and equipment right. Clearly the days are long gone when you could get away with slapping black crosses on the side of US Patton tanks and expecting they could pass as German Panzers (or even of borrowing Leopards from the Bundeswehr, as 1977’s A Bridge Too Far does).

After the opening sequence, however, it all goes rather Pete Tong. The problem comes from Robert Rodat’s script, already in existence before Spielberg became attached to the project. Though inspired by real events, once off the Omaha beaches it pulls out just about every war movie cliché you can think of. There’s the noble commanding officer, played by Tom Hanks, who’ll do his best so that he can go home. There’s the gruff sergeant with a heart of gold. There’s the scrawny little weed who hides from combat. There’s the big black guy (well, okay, it’s Vin Diesel and the character is Italian, as the US Army was segregated until 1948, but it’s played like a big black guy). You know what’s going to happen. You know Hanks, if he doesn’t survive the movie, will be the last to die. You know the soldier who preaches self-righteously about the rules of war in the treatment of prisoners will end up breaking those rules. You know the soldier who decides the whole thing is a waste of time and he’s not going to get killed on a fool’s errand will come back to help his buddies. Scenes you’ve seen before in other movies recur: Hanks firing uselessly with a pistol at an approaching tank which then explodes; or the soldier who, having had his life saved by his helmet, takes the helmet off to examine it, only to be shot through the head.

These clichés give the script a falsity; this is unfortunately borne out by the way the movie fakes things for effect. For one instance, Hanks and his men are presented in the movie as belonging to a Ranger battalion, and veterans of the North African and Italian campaigns. But the 2nd Rangers, the battalion that went ashore at Omaha, to which Hanks supposedly belongs, were fresh recruits from the US – even their CO had seen no action. The Ranger units that had served in the Mediterranean had been mostly wiped out at Anzio a few months earlier. For another instance, I am deeply suspicious of the bridge that Hanks and his men defend at the end of the movie. Anyone who’s seen The Longest Day (1962) or A Bridge Too Far will know that the sort of bridges people are interested in are usually big solid steel affairs. In Ryan the fight is over a stone bridge that looks like it might be mediaeval in origin. It’s very picturesque, but it doesn’t look much like it could support tanks.

One criticism made by UK reviewers at the time was that the movie ignored the British contribution to D-Day. This is something UK critics get very jumpy about, partly because they come from a tradition which still likes to believe that Britain was an equal partner in the
war in Europe, and partly because so many US movies do act as if every battle was won by
the US forces alone. The criticism is and isn’t fair to Ryan. It isn’t fair because the movie is
the tale of troops in the US sector in Normandy – they simply wouldn’t see any British forces.
But then there is a conversation between Hanks and another character about Montgomery’s
slowness in the British sector, and how over-rated he was. You would never realize from this
conversation that Monty was actually, at this point, in charge of all Allied forces in Nor-
mandy, British and American – so these two officers are slagging off their General Officer Com-
manding. In fact, while Monty infuriated and annoyed senior American officers he came into
contact with, he was as popular with the lower ranks of the US Army as he was with British
troops. What the movie script presents us does not represent the opinions of American sol-
diers in Normandy, but the post-war judgement made by many American historians on Mont-
gomery.

At the time of Ryan’s release, many commentators drew comparisons with that other fa-
nomous D-Day movie The Longest Day. Even such a normally sensible character as Billy Bragg
made the comparison in favour of Ryan, pointing out that in The Longest Day all the deaths
looked neat and sanitized, implying that The Longest Day glorified war where Ryan did not.
To which all I can say is, if you think The Longest Day glorifies war, then you need to watch
the movie again. At the time (1962), the sort of blood and gore deaths that Ryan specializes in
were neither technically possible nor acceptable on screen. But this does not mean that a
wholly sanitized picture was presented; the scenes of US paratroopers landing on towns, be-
ing machine-gunned by the Germans, or landing in wells or burning buildings, retains a pow-
er even today. (Though the most disturbing deaths I’ve ever seen in a war movie were in the
even earlier Dunkirk, from 1958.) I feel that, in comparison with Ryan, The Longest Day
comes out as the more accurate and true-to-life picture. Both movies use irony, but where
Ryan’s is clichéd and faked, The Longest Day’s is real, such as the scene in which US Rang-
ers scale the Pointe du Hoc to knock out a gun emplacement, only to discover that the guns
are missing; that really happened (in the movie they have never been installed; in reality they
had been moved elsewhere). Even in the depiction of Omaha, the earlier movie scores in at
least one respect. Ryan gives the impression that the action at Omaha was bloody, but brief;
the impression is given that the troops were quickly off the beaches. The truth, as seen in The
Longest Day, is that they were pinned down for hours.

In the cold light of day, it is surprising how little new Saving Private Ryan has to say. It
tells us that war is bloody and brutal and nasty, but so does All Quiet on the Western Front
(1930). So does Sam Peckinpah’s Cross of Iron (1977). So, for that matter, does Blackadder
Goes Forth (1989). All Ryan does is tell us this with a bigger FX budget.

And a surprising lack of cynicism. The movie begins and ends with a fluttering American
flag, and never really questions the men who give the orders. There’s much talk about every-
thing being ‘FUBAR’ (Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition), but there’s only one real in-
stance of that being shown. On the whole, the generals are presented as making sound deci-
sions. Where things go wrong, they usually appear to be just the sort of things that happen in
war. The movie never explains that part of the reason Omaha was such a bloodbath was that
the US command turned down the chance to get their hands on the specialist armour that the
British forces used with great success on their beaches, with the exception of amphibious
tanks – which were all launched too far from the beach and were swamped.1 Ryan has none
of the cynicism and weariness displayed in post-Vietnam war movies such as The Bridge at
Remagen (1969) or Robert Altman’s M*A*S*H (1970). Hell, even a flag-waver like the Vi-
etnam War John Wayne vehicle The Green Berets (1968) has a harder edge. Rather than be-

1 In fairness there is reference to the failure of tanks to get ashore, but in dialogue that is hard to hear due to
explosions.
ing a post-Vietnam war movie, *Saving Private Ryan*, which begins and ends with the American flag, seems to me to be a return to pre-Vietnam patriotism.

There is the ‘central question’ of the movie; is it right to send a patrol of eight men to rescue one soldier? In tune with its overall tone, the movie’s answer is clearly ‘yes’; by rescuing Private Ryan, so that his mother still has one son left alive, the patrol are doing something good, something worth sacrificing their lives for. A truly cynical movie would have killed Ryan, making the whole enterprise entirely pointless. In any case, like so much of the movie, the moral dilemma is fake. Because in the real events that inspired the script, the US Army did not send a patrol of eight men, but a single Army chaplain.

This is not really a ‘new sort of war movie’. It may be dressed up with high-tech FX realism and clever cinematography to lend authenticity to the battle scenes, but it is also steeped in the cinematic vocabulary of such movies as *The Longest Day*, *The Battle of the Bulge* (1965), *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), *Kelly’s Heroes* (1970), *The Bridge at Remagen*, *The Big Red One* (1980), or a dozen others that the movie buff Spielberg clearly saw and absorbed as a young man.

I feel that what has happened is that Spielberg’s instincts as an entertainer have subverted his noble ambitions. As has been observed before, there are two Steven Spielbergs, one the maker of important movies like *The Colour Purple* (1985) and *Schindler’s List* (1993), and the other the one who recreates the ’40s serial as the Indiana Jones pictures, or the Ray Harryhausen monster movie as the *Jurassic Park* series. Though *Saving Private Ryan* was presented as being the product of the first, it appears in fact to be the product of the second. It appears to be Spielberg’s remake of the 1960s ensemble war movie (a friend observed that it was a John Wayne war movie, which is a slight variation on the same conclusion). Viewed in those terms, *Saving Private Ryan* is actually a fine movie – my objection to it is that it was sold to us as something more.

The real ‘Private Ryan’ was Fritz Niland, who lost two brothers in the Normandy campaign, and another shot down and presumed killed over Burma (though he turned out to have survived). Niland served in E (‘Easy’) Company of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division. His story gets six paragraphs in Stephen E. Ambrose’s history of Easy Company, *Band of Brothers* (1992). It was presumably as a result of researching for *Saving Private Ryan* that Ambrose was invited on as historical consultant for that movie (though after filming had been completed), and that, two years later, Spielberg and Hanks set about turning *Band of Brothers* into a ten-part television series.

With *Band of Brothers*, Spielberg and Hanks conclusively redeem themselves for *Saving Private Ryan*. It is everything that the earlier motion picture promised to be but failed to deliver; an actual screen representation of the realities of war. It takes the experience learnt on *Ryan* in realistic depiction of war, such as the use of handheld cameras to give a war correspondent feel to the combat footage, but instead of applying those techniques to a big picture that is essentially false, uses them to enhance a story that is true. These are not made up characters, but real people who lived, fought and died in Europe from 1944 to 1945. Some of them are still alive today, and the production includes their reminiscences at the beginning or end of each episode.

Of course, the series does manipulate. A close comparison of the series as broadcast with Ambrose’s book reveals that, no, it wasn’t those individuals that did this, but others, or that incidents which took place on separate days have been amalgamated into a single action. There is a certain degree of alteration for dramatic effect (though the weakest episode, ‘The Last Patrol’, is perhaps weak precisely because it departs furthest from reality in order to create dramatic tension). But, because the series has to be aware that it is depicting real people, and if they are not alive, then their close relatives and friends often are, there is a limit to
what it can do. There are not the composite characters of Ryan, designed to be a ‘typical’ cross-section of soldiery. In Ryan the characters have been drawn to be clearly distinct from one another. In Band of Brothers, the individual characters are, like real soldiers, much of a muchness, looking at first like an anonymous mass. It is only through watching the episodes that you come to see the distinctions between them. This, I suspect, is what real groups of soldiers are like. And the series makes not attempt to hide their failings. Some of them are drunks, some are inexperienced, some incompetent. They are seen looting, shooting people trying to surrender, screaming in pain when they’re wounded; they are portrayed as basically decent men placed into situations that they were never properly prepared for.

The anonymity of the individuals is helped by the casting. Ryan was full of name actors, many of them rather too old for the roles they were playing. (Hanks can get away with it, but Ted Danson as a paratrooper? Do me a favour!) Even where they were not big screen stars, they were familiar from roles on television. Most of the actors cast as members of Easy Company are largely unknown. Many, in fact, are particularly unknown in the US, as they are British or British-based actors; Damian Lewis, who has the key role of Richard Winters, a platoon commander in Easy who assumed command of the company on D-Day, and was later promoted to become commander of the 2nd Battalion of the 506th PIR, was little-known before this; he had yet to be in the remake of The Forsyte Saga (2002). For a UK viewer, these actors are so out of context as to be barely recognizable; only after looking at a cast list do you realize that Johnny Martin is played by Dexter Fletcher, of Press Gang (1989–1993) and Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels (1998) fame, or that the US sergeant who you were racking your brain for what US movie or series you’d seen him in before is actually Spaced’s Simon Pegg. (The US accents are, to this English ear, impeccable, such that it is actually very weird seeing some of the actors in the ‘Making of …’ feature on the DVD speaking in their own voices, while still dressed in their uniforms.) The only true ‘name’ actor in the production is David Schwimmer, who stakes his claim for serious acting credentials by taking a deeply unsympathetic role (though it’s really only Ross Geller stripped of any redeeming features). And here, as in all the other roles, a great deal of care clearly went into the casting, and then the wardrobe, in ensuring that the actors look right. When you see photos of the real Easy Company, you have to look twice just to make sure you’re not looking at the actors.

It’s probably no more cynical in tone than Saving Private Ryan, of course. But at least it doesn’t wave its flag or moral message in our faces in the way the first movie does. Granted, there is an episode entitled ‘Why We Fight’, a large section of which features Easy Company discovering a concentration camp at Landsberg. This incident only takes up five paragraphs of Ambrose’s book. But it did happen; it’s not like the incident was made up to suit a moral purpose. By and large, the series concentrates on telling the story, and allowing the viewer to make up his own mind. If you were Donald Rumsfeld, I’m sure you could use it to encourage the population to support ‘our boys’ out in Iraq. All Spielberg and Hanks are saying is, this is what American servicemen did; you should not forget it.

That is what they were trying to do in Saving Private Ryan as well. I still consider that movie flawed, but without it, Band of Brothers probably would never have been made. So I’ll forgive.