Saving Private Ryan – Study Guide

Plot
The film opens with an oldish man and his family visiting the American war cemetery in Normandy. He finds a particular grave and weeps uncontrollably as he remembers what happened.

The scene changes to the Normandy coast on 6 June 1944 where landing craft are approaching Dog Green Section of Omaha Beach. Captain John Miller (Tom Hanks) is shaking with fear as he waits to arrive. As they leave the landing craft many are killed before they get into the water but many more are killed in the water and on the beach by mortars and machine guns. The only protection they have is the tank traps: men cower behind them in terror but they need to move up the beach in order to make way for the next wave.

Some make it as far as the sea wall where medics make ineffective attempts to help the wounded—they stop the bleeding of one man but he’s immediately shot in the head. Eventually they manage to secure the German positions but so many are dead that the sea is red with blood. Some surrendering Germans are shot and many GIs are overcome with emotion at what has taken place. One of the dead has “Ryan, S2″ marked on his pack.

Back in the USA a typing pool is writing messages of condolence to the families of men killed in the war. One typist notices that three telegrams are going to one person on the same day: three Ryans. She consults an officer who refers it to the Colonel. He ascertains that there is a fourth brother, Private James Ryan (Matt Damon), who had parachuted into Normandy with the 101st Airborne Division the night before the invasion. Nobody knows his whereabouts. The Chief of Staff, General George Marshall, is eventually informed. He orders a rescue mission despite protests from his aides that Ryan was probably already dead and that the mission would be doomed from the outset. Marshall removes from a book (a Bible?) a copy of a moving letter which he reads. It had been sent by Abraham Lincoln to a mother who had lost all her sons in the American Civil War. Lincoln’s recognition of the extent of the woman’s loss changes the minds of the aides.

Back on Omaha Beach, Miller reports on his company’s condition: 35 are dead and twice that number are wounded. He is given a fresh assignment: to take seven men with him and bring back Ryan. Miller takes six of his plus a very anxious translator, Corporal Upham (Jeremy Davies). They set off to where they believe Ryan’s company is likely to be but there is dissension within the squad. They don’t see the sense in risking the lives of eight men in order to save one.

When they reach the village there is some fighting going on and they join a group of GIs sheltering behind a wall. Miller and his men, together with some of the GIs they’ve just met make their way towards the centre of the town. During all of this there is speculation about Miller’s background since he has refused to say anything about himself. There is a pool of $300 for the first man to find out what he did prior to the war.

They come across a terrified family marooned in the first floor of their house with the wall completely missing. The family beg the Americans to take their children to safety but Miller refuses. One of his men, Pte Caparzo, lifts the daughter down but Miller snatches her from him. A moment later and Caparzo is shot by a sniper. The others dive for cover and can’t attend to his wounds. Their own sniper, Pte Jackson (Barry Pepper), shoots the German but too late to save their friend.

A little further on they stop for a breather in a small courtyard but one man knocks a fallen beam against a wall which promptly collapses revealing several German soldiers inside. There is a brief stand off as they point guns at each other and shout but some other Americans have arrived and shoot the Germans first. Miller talks to the Captain of this new company and discovers that they have Private Ryan with them. He is brought to Miller who breaks the bad news. Ryan is distraught but they discover that he is the wrong Ryan. There is a man from the
proper Ryan's company there and he tells Miller that they were scattered widely during the landing and he believes that many of them are some distance away.

Miller and his men stay in a church overnight. Miller chats with his sergeant (Tom Sizemore); his hands are shaking again as they have done intermittently since leaving Portsmouth so Sizemore tells him he needs a new job. Miller reflects that every time he loses a man on a mission he tells himself that he probably saved 10 times more lives by enabling the mission to succeed but this time 'the mission is a man'. They wonder whether Pte Ryan is worth the trouble.

The next day they come across a crashed glider and many wounded men who had gathered there. The pilot tells his story of how they could not maintain altitude due to the extra weights of metal plates welded to the floor in order to protect a general flying with them resulting in the loss of 22 lives. More men arrive from the surrounding area—the parachute drops before D-Day had been very off-target and had resulted in confusion and many casualties. Miller’s men start looking through the collected dog-tags of the dead and Miller calls for Ryan as others arrive. After a while someone is brought to Miller who had been with Ryan and he tells him that Ryan had been sent by a Colonel to help defend a bridge.

They set off again and come across three dead Americans near a German radar station protected by a machine gun emplacement. Miller wants to take it but the men don’t think they should jeopardise the mission or their lives. Miller insists, however, as their main objective is to win the war. They succeed but their medic, Wade (Giovanni Ribisi) has been badly wounded. The others cannot stop the blood loss and he dies.

A couple of the men start to beat up the sole surviving German and want to shoot him. Miller stops them because he wants the man to bury the American dead first. When Corporal Upham protests he is made to help. The German man is terrified that he will be shot but Miller blindfolds him and sends him away. The others are furious—especially Pte Reiben (Edward Burns) who starts to leave. Sgt. Horvath threatens to shoot him but Miller defuses the situation by suddenly revealing his background as a teacher. He tells the others that he sees their mission as being something that will help him get home quicker. He allows Reiben to leave but he stays.

Later on they dive for cover when a German half-track passes them. Suddenly the vehicle is hit by a bazooka. Miller and his men shoot the Germans escaping the vehicle and then meet the three Airborne soldiers who had destroyed it. One of them turns out to be Ryan. Miller’s squad accompany Ryan back to the bridge where he is told about his brothers. He refuses to go back with them. He is to keep out of the action as much as possible. When they have done so they wait until eventually they hear the rumble of approaching tanks. The ambush doesn’t turn out as they expected: they are heavily outnumbered and have a much harder time against the Germans than they hoped. Upham is helpless with terror in the middle of the fighting and cannot bring himself to go to the rescue of a colleague who is fighting hand-to-hand with a German.

At length the few remaining Americans are beaten back across the bridge and a tank drives onto it. Miller tries to detonate the explosives but is shot and seriously wounded by the German soldier he had allowed to leave from the radar station. As the tank advances, Miller futilely shoots at it and is amazed when it explodes but realises that an American P51 Tankbuster had scored a direct hit. Reinforcements arrive and the bridge is held but Miller...
dies. The only members of his unit to survive are Reiben and Upham. Upham climbs out of the shell crater where he has been hiding and takes prisoner the five Germans who had been firing from just in front of him. One of these is the German from the radar station. He puts his hands up and speaks to Upham but Upham had seen him wound Miller and so shoots him.

The scene switches back to the cemetery again. Ryan is looking at Miller’s grave. His family come to comfort him and he begs his wife to tell him that he’s led a good life and that he’s a good man—he wants to be reassured that was worth the loss of the others

http://studyguides.rivassl.com/study-guide-to-saving-private-ryan/75/

Principal Characters

Captain John H. Miller
The Captain and leader of the eight man band sent to find Private Ryan. Captain Miller leads 'Charlie' Company of the 2nd Ranger Battalion during the D-Day landings. He is a Shell-Shocked Veteran, his hand often shaking when in the presence of danger. It is revealed that before the war he was an English teacher. He cares about his men and remembers the names and faces of the soldiers he has led that have died. When he makes a plan of action he tries to ensure it will have the least casualties possible.

Sergeant Mike Horvath
Captain Miller's sergeant and 'right hand man.’ Horvath is loyal to his captain and has battled alongside him in numerous countries. He is the only character that Miller can talk to in some way as an equal.

Private Richard Reiben
A big mouthed and opinionated soldier from Brooklyn who takes the deaths of his teammates very hard. Reiben seems quite close to his friends and openly defies Captain Miller's orders, particularly when Wade dies and Miller allows the German soldier to leave unharmed, threatening to go AWOL. He’s a jerk with a Heart of Gold, quite easily the most surly and temperamental member of Miller's squad and the only member of the original squad to be alive at the end of the novel.

Private Daniel Jackson
A religious sniper and the best marksman in the team. When about to fire, Jackson is coldly emotionless and murmurs Bible verses to himself but he is friendly when in casual talk with his friends. Considers himself to be a finely tuned instrument of God’s vengeance and every man he kills is in the name of God. His pre-shot murmurs are taken out of the Book of Psalms.

Private Stanley Mellish
A Jewish soldier who is good friend with Caparzo. He is nicknamed "Fish" by his friends.

Private Adrian Caparzo
Seems loud and tough, but is prepared to rescue the French children, which costs him his life. He is the first of Miller’s squad to get killed trying to save Ryan.

Corporal Irwin Wade, Medic.
A doctor by training, Wade puts his medical expertise to the test acting as a battlefield medic. He is quite prepared to put his own life at risk to save others and will treat German prisoners with the same care as his American comrades.

Corporal Timothy E Upham
A translator who speaks French and German and is the moral conscience of the squad. Upham is brought into the squad after Captain Miller's translator was killed. Upham is completely out of his depth being placed with these very tough Rangers. However is not completely useless as a soldier and gradually earns the squad’s respect. As the journey to rescue Ryan progresses he gradually learns to be a soldier and by the end of the novel
takes an active part in the defence of the bridge at Ramelle, even shooting Miller’s killer, the captured German soldier he had ‘befriended’ at the radar bunker. He is the only other member of Miller’s squad to be alive at the end of the novel.

**Private James Francis Ryan**

The Private Ryan in question which Captain Miller’s squad go to find. A farmer from Iowa whose three brothers are killed in action so to avoid bad publicity it is demanded that Ryan be found and brought home to his grieving mother. The squad finds him, but Ryan refuses to leave his post and the only ‘brothers’ he now has. The elderly Ryan opens and closes the novel as he comes to pay his respects to Miller’s grave.

**Steamboat Willy**

A German soldier who is taken prisoner by Captain Miller’s squad after they attack the radar station. He is eventually allowed to walk free by Miller with disastrous consequences. The squad want to shoot him in revenge for Wade and he does his best to ingratiate himself with them by trying to sing the American National Anthem and declaring he hates Hitler. [Note: *Steamboat Willy* is the name of the first Mickey Mouse cartoon made by Walt Disney.]

http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Characters/SavingPrivateRyan

**Themes**

**Sacrifice**

The main theme of the novel is that sacrifice should be honoured. The novel opens and closes at the Normandy war grave where Ryan has taken his family so he can pay his respects and give thanks to Miller and the other soldiers who died so he could have a future. The theme extends to encompass all America and their allies whose freedom was won through the sacrifice of those who died fighting in WW2 and the novel reminds us that duty, honour, respect and even the sacrifice of one’s’ life are worthy if the cause is just. The future of a nation, its way of life and the freedom of its people depends upon the willingness of a country to make such sacrifice to defend that future, even at horrific expense.

**Courage**

Acts of courage frequently occur in the novel, particularly from Miller in battle situations. He ‘leads from the front’ and on several occasions risks his own life to ‘save’ others, ex. distracting the machine guns on the beach so Jackson can get into a good firing position, or when he rescues the French children. Miller also chooses to attack the bunker by the radar station and then when he stays to defend the bridge at Ramelle. Both these actions put his life in danger but he chooses to carry out these actions as they are the right, the ‘decent’ thing to do to help the Allies to be victorious. The other character who exemplifies courage is the Medic, Wade. On Omaha beach he risks his life to deliver first aid to soldiers under fire and unarmed he supports the attack on the radar station, courageously calling out a warning about the second gunner, an act that costs him his life.

**Overcoming Fear**

Coupled with courage is overcoming fear. All soldiers are frightened to some extent going into battle and Miller is no exception to this. His hands constantly shake with stress and fear, but he overcomes this fear and is able to fight and lead his men. Examples of him overcoming fear are at the beginning of the novel when he gets off the landing craft, when he attacks the radar station bunker and his decision to defend the bridge at Ramelle. The other character who overcomes his fear is Upham the translator. At the start of the novel he is a bookish administrator who has never fired a gun in action. He is terrified when he first goes into battle but by the end of the novel plays his part in the defence of the bridge at Ramelle and even ends up shooting the soldier who killed Miller.