

FILM RESPONSE PAPER

Film Response Paper – Saving Private Ryan

Joshua Peltz

Franklin University

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Steven Spielberg's 1998 war epic, 'Saving Private Ryan', is the story of a small band of US Army Rangers assigned to a rescue mission in the aftermath of the D-day Normandy Invasion. The film begins with the amphibious assault at Omaha beach, where the group's leader, Captain Miller, is the first group of US Soldiers to break through the German defenses, enabling the allies to establish a beachhead for the invasion of Europe. Following the siege on the beach, a scene unfolds where CPT Miller describes another tough, harrowing mission he had just accomplished to his Commanding Officer. At the conclusion of this brief, he is assigned to a mission to rescue Private James Ryan, a sole remaining survivor whose brothers were killed in combat across the theater. To prepare for the mission, Captain Miller requests a Soldier who speaks French and German, and is assigned Corporal Timothy Upham, a mousy intelligence troop with no combat training to assist with intelligence during the mission. Private Ryan was a member of the 101st Airborne Division who parachuted behind German lines prior to D-Day to skirmish and sow discontent through the German ranks prior to the actual amphibious assault. The members of the group, who've already accomplished extremely difficult and dangerous missions, are unhappy that their lives are being put in jeopardy in the search of a single individual that they don't even know the precise location of. As they move through the film, the group remains defiant to the mission, but held together by their Commander and Platoon Sergeant. Corporal Upham is naïve in the true nature of warfare, and holds fervently to the laws of armed conflict, but as he observes the group get killed one by one, his moral compass becomes increasingly fractured.

When observing the dynamic of the group through the film, an overlay of Tuckman's Model of Group Development reveals that at the outset of the movie, the group has already been

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formed, since it is a military unit. The chain of command is already established, and each member brings to the table a unique capability or character attribute. Doc Wade is their talented, capable medic who regrets not showing his mother how much he loved her. Private Reiben is the sarcastic heavy weapons operator, who competently follows orders, but gripes the whole time. Sergeant Horvath is the decorated veteran Platoon Sergeant who provides guidance and discipline to the younger troops. Private Jackson is the devoutly religious sharpshooter who believes that his talent as a sniper makes him a righteous holy warrior. Mellish and Caparzo are best friends from different ways of life who built a bond of brotherhood based on their shared military experience. And, of course, their Commander, Captain Miller, a battle-hardened tactical expert and tough, yet human leader, was originally a schoolteacher in Pennsylvania before joining the elite Army Rangers. This core group is already essentially formed, having been through training and the rigors of combat prior to the outset of the mission to find Private Ryan. Corporal Upham is the addition, the odd-man-out who struggles to find his place among the team. He is not taken seriously because he is not a combat troop, but rather an analyst. Following the battle at Normandy, the group sets off across France into the 'storming' phase, and conversations center around their displeasure at being put into harm's way to try and find a single man who may already be dead. They lose their first group member, Private Caparzo, to a German sniper who disobeyed an order from the Captain by attempting to rescue a French child whose house had been bombarded. Following Private Caparzo's death, the group falls into a 'norming' state, with the vocal discontent of the group trailing off and the onset of acceptance that they were going to continue the mission regardless of casualties, because that was their charge. They continue the mission and end up losing Doc Wade during an assault on a German position. There is a slight regression into the storming phase here, but it is short lived, and the

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mission returns to the norming phase until they locate Private James Ryan who is adamantly defending a crossroads against German advance. The group, with the addition of Ryan and his compatriots, enter the 'performing' stage of Tuckman's Model, and prepare for and mount a valiant defense against a massively superior German force. Just prior to the final battle, there is a moment where Private Reiben, the most vocal of the group against the mission, looks at Private Ryan, and without saying anything, simply gives him a nod of acceptance, signifying that whatever personal feelings the group may have had for or against the mission to find him, they are now brothers in arms. While they are ultimately successful, the adjourning phase results in the combat deaths of every group member except for Private Ryan and Corporal Upham.

Through the course of the movie, Corporal Upham as most aptly been described as the 'Recorder' when referencing group roles from Small Group Communication, but once the final battle begins, his role shifts significantly to being more of an 'expediter', racing between buildings to provide ammunition for the riflemen and machine gunners. Captain Miller maintains his status as the task leader, and Sergeant Horvath is the supporter, supporting the actions of the Captain by directing tactical movements of Soldiers.

The movie 'Saving Private Ryan' has very clear roles and responsibilities assigned to a group because of its military origin, but it is nevertheless curious how those roles and responsibilities shift between movement over terrain and actual combat. Not surprisingly, this is a very accurate representation of actual small unit combat, where young men from different walks of life who are exceptionally diverse can simply turn aside differences and be effective in a combat environment.

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