

## Teacher's notes

# Saving Private Ryan

by Max Allan Collins based on the screenplay by Robert Rodat



## SUMMARY

**S**aving *Private Ryan* is the account of a GI squad on a dangerous mission behind enemy lines in occupied France during the Second World War. The story opens as Captain Miller and his unit arrive at Omaha Beach in France as part of the Allied invasion of Normandy in June 1944. Hundreds of men are killed and wounded as the German army tries to prevent the invasion. Soon after his arrival Captain John Miller is ordered to undertake a special mission: to track down an American soldier, Private James Ryan, and bring him home to his mother who has recently lost three of her four sons in the war.

As they penetrate further into enemy territory in search of Ryan, Miller's men find themselves questioning their orders: why is the life of one man, who may already be dead, worth more than their own? To start with no-one seems to know where Private Ryan is; then the group finds the wrong Ryan. Eventually after losing two of their men, Caparzo and Wade, Miller's squad finds Private Ryan, but he refuses to be taken back to America, preferring instead to stay in France and fight the Germans. Miller and his men decide that they cannot force Ryan to return and they stay to defend the village against the Germans. The Americans are heavily outnumbered and, in the battle to stop the Germans, Jackson, Mellish, Sarge and Miller all die. Of the original squad only Reiben and Upham survive to complete the mission to save Private Ryan.

### Main characters

#### Captain Tom Miller

38-year-old leader of the group.

#### Sergeant Horwarth

30-year-old, tough, experienced soldier whose priority is to protect his Captain even though he doesn't fully understand him.

#### Private Reiben

24-year-old, smart New Yorker who doesn't hide the fact that he resents risking his own life to save Ryan.

#### Private Caparzo

22-year-old tough Chicago Italian with a gentle side. He is killed being kind to some French children.

#### Corporal Edward Wade

28-year-old, from California: the unit's sensitive and dedicated medic.

#### Private Daniel Jackson

23-year-old, deeply religious man from Tennessee – marksman whose shooting skills turn out to be invaluable.

#### Private Stanley Mellish

21-year-old Jewish soldier who has personal reasons for fighting the Nazis.

#### Corporal Upham

24-year-old map-maker and translator who joins Miller's group when their interpreter is killed.

### Private Ryan

The youngest of four brothers. He becomes a symbol for Miller and his men: if he goes home the whole group can go home.

## ABOUT THE BOOK AND THE FILM

*Saving Private Ryan*, published in 1998, is a novel by Max Allan Collins based on the screenplay by Robert Rodat.

The film *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) was directed by Steven Spielberg and starred Tom Hanks as Captain Miller, Ed Burns, Tom Sizemore, and Matt Damon as Private Ryan. For many critics and cinema-goers it is the greatest war film ever made. Lasting a total of 2 hours 50 minutes, the first 20 minutes realistically depict the Normandy invasion. The audience witnesses the most graphic, terrifying sequence ever made: a soldier in shock picks up his own severed arm, another dies before our eyes, screaming for his mother.

## BACKGROUND AND THEMES

*Saving Private Ryan* is about the heroism of soldiers doing their duty in wartime, but as the plot develops readers and audiences are reminded that the physical combat of war is hell; that battlefield decisions made on the spur of the moment are often brutal; and that orders from the top can be absurd. In the end, human life is insignificant and the good die young, both physically and mentally. Here war is a sport played by commanders with too much power and too little understanding of human suffering.

At a personal level every man in Miller's unit has his beliefs challenged. They all set off knowing they may not return and that their mission may be for nothing. Whatever their own feelings about what they are doing, they show bravery and courage as they take part in a historic fight for freedom.

The story is set in the Europe of 1944. The Nazis are still advancing across Western Europe, subjugating cities and entire nations. Faced with the distinct possibility of defeat, the Allied powers plan the greatest invasion in history – a crushing blow that they hope will hold up the German attack and force them into retreat. On June 6th 1944, D-Day, 3000 landing craft, 2500 other ships and 500 naval vessels left England for the French coast. 13,000 aircraft supported them as they arrived in France. Several hundred of these planes carried parachutists who were dropped behind enemy lines.

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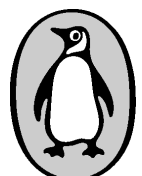
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## Teacher's notes

### Communicative activities

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the Reader, and supplement those exercises. For supplementary exercises covering shorter sections of the book, see the photocopyable Student's Activities pages of the Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class readers but, with the exception of discussion and pair/group work questions, can also be used by students working alone in a self-access centre.

#### ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

- 1 Have any students seen the film *Saving Private Ryan*? If so, ask them to share their impressions with the rest of the class. (Discourage them from giving away the story.)
- 2 What do students know about the Second World War? For example:
  - (a) When was it?
  - (b) Who were on the two sides?
  - (c) Where did it take place?

#### ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

##### Chapters 1–4

Put students into pairs and ask them to discuss these questions.

- (a) Why does the writer start the story in 1998 with the American family's visit to the cemetery in France?
- (b) What is the mood of the men in the landing craft as they approach the Normandy beach?

##### Chapters 5–6

- (a) What do you think is the main purpose of the War Office Department of Public Relations?
- (b) How do Captain Miller and his men react to the news of their mission to save Private Ryan?
- (c) What are the advantages and disadvantages of Corporal Upham joining Miller's squad?

##### Chapters 7–9

- (a) How do you think Corporal Upham feels during the first day with Miller and his squad?
- (b) What does the shooting of Caparzo tell us about the realities of war?
- (c) What different emotions do you think the 'wrong' Private felt during his conversation with Captain Miller?
- (d) Jackson says to Miller: *I do think you're heartless. That's your job right now.* Do you think Miller's is *heartless* or not? Do you agree with Jackson's opinion?

##### Chapters 10–12

- (a) How do the American soldiers react when they see a group of German prisoners.
- (b) The men have a discussion about whether it is easier to kill Japanese or German soldiers. Wade says *'Killing a man is killing a man. It doesn't matter what he looks like.'* What does this discussion tell you about soldiers' attitudes to death and killing?
- (c) Why are the soldiers surprised by what Miller tells them about his private life?

##### Chapters 13–15

- (a) How do Miller's men react when Private Ryan refuses to leave his comrades.

- (b) What do Miller's dying words mean; 'Earn this.'?
- (c) How would Miller have reacted to the 74-year-old James Ryan when he said *I only hope that in your opinion, I earned what you did for me.*

#### ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

##### (a) Saving Private Ryan Quiz

Students work in pairs or small groups. Give each group a copy of this quiz and set a time limit (3 minutes) for them to answer the questions without looking at the book, and then give them 3 minutes more with the book to refer to.

##### Quiz

- 1 What was Captain Miller's first name?
- 2 Where in America did Ryan come from?
- 3 What was Corporal Upham's original job in the army?
- 4 What was the name of the German soldier's dog?
- 5 Which of Miller's men is killed in Neuville-au-Plain?
- 6 What is the middle name of the first James Ryan?
- 7 What did the German prisoner say he liked about America?
- 8 What was Captain Miller's job before he became a soldier?
- 9 What was the name of the village where Miller and his men finally found Ryan?
- 10 Of the original group of 8 in Miller's squad who survives to take Ryan home?

- (b) Do you think we can learn anything from the fact the Captain Miller is killed by the German soldier he had recently spared?

## Glossary

It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. They are practised in the 'Before You Read' sections of exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

##### Chapters 1–4

**artillery** (n) large guns, especially ones on wheels or fixed in one place  
**bunker** (n) a strongly built shelter for soldiers, usually underground  
**casualty** (n) someone who is hurt or killed in a battle  
**cliff** (n) a high rock, with very steep sides, near the sea  
**command** (n) the control of a group of people  
**company** (n) a group of about 120 soldiers who are part of a larger group  
**corporal** (n) a low rank in the army  
**cover** (n) shelter or protection from attack  
**explosive** (n) a substance that can cause an explosion  
**grenade** (n) a small bomb that can be thrown by hand  
**helmet** (n) a strong hard hat worn by soldiers  
**jeep** (n) a type of car made for travelling over rough ground  
**lieutenant** (n) a low rank of officer in the army  
**machine gun** (n) a gun that fires a lot of bullets very quickly  
**medic** (n) someone in the army who gives medical treatment  
**mine** (n) a type of bomb that is hidden below the ground  
**mortar** (n) a heavy gun that fires bombs or shells in a high curve  
**private** (n) a soldier of the lowest rank  
**sharpshooter** (n) a soldier who is very accurate at shooting a rifle  
**shell** (n) a metal container, full of explosive, that is fired from a gun  
**trench** (n) a long deep hole that is dug in the ground as a protection for soldiers

##### Chapters 5–6

**colonel** (n) a high rank in the army  
**general** (n) a very high rank in the army  
**mission** (n) a very important job done by someone in the army  
**parachute** (n) a thing that you wear fastened to your back to make you fall through the air slowly when you jump out of a plane  
**paratrooper** (n) a soldier who is trained to jump out of a plane using a parachute  
**squad** (n) a small group of soldiers working together as a unit

##### Chapters 7–9

**civilian** (n) someone who is not a member of the armed forces  
**dog tags** (n) small pieces of metal that soldiers wear round their necks with their name, etc written on them  
**sniper** (n) someone who shoots at unprotected people from a hidden position



## Student's activities

### Photocopiable

Students can do these exercises alone or with one or more other students. Pair/group-only activities are marked.

### Activities before reading the book

Look at the cover of the book.

- Make a list of adjectives to describe the soldier. Think about how he feels and looks.
- What image of war does the cover convey?

### Activities while reading the book

#### CHAPTERS 1-4

##### Chapter 1

Work in pairs

- Who do you think Granddad and Grandma are?
- Why do they want to visit the war cemetery?
- Why is there a strange look on Grandma's face?
- The 7-year-old Jimmy didn't know there had ever been a war in France? What would his Granddad think of this?

##### Chapter 2

Who says these things? What are they talking about? What do their words show about their feelings or their character?

- 'Do you really think we're going to be taking any more boat rides after this?'
- 'I guess they don't do much boating back home.'
- 'Two-thirds, at the most.'
- 'It's time to make your peace with God.'
- 'Keep it simple, move fast, stay apart ... Good luck.'
- 'It looks like there's a little opposition.'
- 'It can't happen to me, can it?'

##### Chapter 3

Match the beginnings and endings to complete the explanations of events in Chapter 3.

- The soldiers took off their backpacks...
  - Captain Miller and Delancey swam underwater
  - Miller continued to carry Delancey's body after he was dead
  - Everything suddenly went quiet for Miller
  - Soldiers were sitting against the stone sea wall
  - Soldiers took other soldiers' guns
  - Sarge didn't want Miller to be killed
- because it will mean he will have to be in charge.
  - because the explosion had made him temporarily deaf.
  - because their own had sand in them and the soldiers whose guns they took were dead.
  - to avoid being hit by bullets.
  - to make it easier to move.
  - to protect himself.
  - to protect themselves against machine-gun fire.

##### Chapter 4

Are these statements true or false?

- Edward Wade, the medic, saves the life of a badly wounded soldier. ....



## Saving Private Ryan



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- Two engineers make special explosives to blow a hole in the sea wall. ....
- Miller shoots the German soldier who comes looking for his dog. ....
- The dog shows Miller and his men a safe route through the mines. ....
- The four young soldiers succeed in getting across the open ground. ....
- Jackson kills the German machine gunner. ....

#### CHAPTERS 5 & 6

##### Chapter 5

Discuss these questions

- Why is it so important that Private James Ryan is saved? What is the US army's main purpose?
- What is going to make this mission particularly tricky?

##### Chapter 6

Finish these sentences

- Reiben would like to be in Caen because ...
- Mellish says that their military training did not...
- Compared with Miller and his men the officers at field headquarters have ...
- Lieutenant Colonel Walter Anderson explains to Miller ...
- Miller describes the new mission to his waiting men as a ...
- Corporal Upham joins the squad because Miller needs someone ...

#### CHAPTERS 7-9

##### Chapter 7

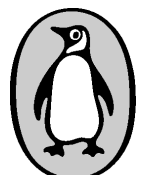
Who says these things? What are they talking about?

- 'I was just wondering if you expect to have more room on the way back.'
- 'We're risking our lives to save a farmer?'
- 'Now isn't that worth risking your lives for?'
- 'Everybody else is behind us.'
- 'I've read a lot about that method of attack.'
- 'Maybe this Private Ryan's good luck.'
- 'I'm part of this squad, too!'
- 'We all have mothers. Captain, you have a mother too.'

##### Chapter 8

Put these events in the correct order 1-8

- Nelson is killed by German bullets as he tries to reach another part of the village. ....
- Caparzo is hit by German sniper fire. ....
- Miller crosses the street, avoiding bullets, and meets Goldman and Hill. ....
- Caparzo takes the little French girl in his arms and plays with her. ....
- Miller and his squad arrive in the occupied village of Neuville-au-Plain. ....
- Jackson shoots the German sniper. ....



## Student's activities

- (g) Miller grabs the French children and takes them to safety. ....
- (h) Miller and his squad meet a French family hiding in a damaged building. ....

### Chapter 9

Work with a partner.  
Make lists of the similarities and differences between the two Private Ryans: the one they meet here and the one they're trying to find.

### CHAPTERS 10-12

#### Chapter 10

- 1 As the squad continue their search for Ryan, Reiben thinks about the four possible results of their mission
  - (a) Match the four options A-D with the situation and Reiben's comment on each.
  - (b) Which are the best and the worst situations for the men?

	Situation	Results
A	Ryan is dead	Ryan survives but the rest of the squad get killed.
B	Ryan has been dead for a long time	The squad will have to carry Ryan.
C	Ryan is wounded	While the squad is making absolutely sure Ryan is dead, they are killed by Germans.
D	Ryan is alive	The squad takes Ryan's dog tags and escape quickly.

- 2 Who says these things and what are they talking about?
  - (a) 'That's an interesting idea.'
  - (b) 'You might want to look at these, too.'
  - (c) 'They think he's crazy.'
  - (d) 'Of course I know him. He's my best friend.'
  - (e) 'That's where we'll find Private Ryan.'

#### Chapter 11

- Complete these sentences.
- (a) The trees on the edge of the field have bullet ...
  - (b) The trail of fresh blood in the field leads to ...
  - (c) Reiben and Mellish do not think it is the squad's job to ...
  - (d) The group decide to try to destroy ...
  - (e) When Mellish and Miller jump into a shell hole they find ...
  - (f) Wade is shot by ...

#### Chapter 12

- Are these statements True or False?
- (a) Wade has been shot in the back. ....
  - (b) Jackson is calm as usual. ....
  - (c) Wade feels his own wounds. ....
  - (d) Wade wants more drugs because he is in such pain. ....
  - (e) Wade shows Miller where Caparzo's letter was. ....
  - (f) Jackson is also badly injured. ....
  - (g) There are three German bodies in the machine-gun position. ....

- (h) The German soldier thinks the Americans are going to kill him. ....
- (i) The German soldier re-joins his fellow soldiers. ....

### CHAPTERS 13-15

#### Chapter 13

- Answer these *Why* questions.
- (a) Why is the village of Ramelle in ruins?
  - (b) Why aren't the American soldiers surprised by the sound of the tank?
  - (c) Why does the tank stop firing?
  - (d) Why does Private Ryan think the American soldiers were crazy?
  - (e) Why do Miller's men feel respect for Private Ryan?
  - (f) Why doesn't Private Ryan want to go back to America?
  - (g) Why does Ryan say the names of Caparzo and Ryan to himself?
  - (h) Why does Miller start asking Henderson about his plans for preventing the Germans crossing the bridge?

#### Chapter 14

- Complete these sentences
- (a) There aren't enough ..... to prevent the Germans from crossing the .....
  - (b) The American soldiers plan to make a German ..... go down the main ..... of the village.
  - (c) Jackson is going to fire at the Germans from the bell tower in the ..... with a .....
  - (d) Sticky bombs are made by filling ..... with ....., then covering the outside with .....
  - (e) Ryan and Miller take up their position in an old ..... near to the .....
  - (f) As the ..... German tanks approach the village the ..... begins to .....
  - (g) Reiben and the other paratroopers throw sticky bombs at the ..... of the tank.
  - (h) The German in the Panzer is shot in the ..... by a bullet from Jackson.
  - (i) Jackson and Parker ..... when the German tank's gun hit the .....
  - (j) Sarge is shot in the .....
  - (k) Miller is shot by the German ..... who has been their .....
  - (l) The German Tiger tank is destroyed by an American .....
  - (m) Reiben takes Caparzo's ..... from Miller's .....

#### Chapter 15

- (a) Why did the 74-year-old James Ryan want to be alone in the cemetery?
- (b) Why were the family in France?
- (c) Why do you think Ryan had not told his wife about what had happened to him in the war?
- (d) Why did he have nightmares?

### Activities after reading the book

- Talk to one or more other students
- (a) What effect did reading *Saving Private Ryan* have on you? How did it make you feel?
  - (b) What would you say was the main message of the book?
  - (c) Which of the characters do you most admire? Why?

