

4-2-2015

World War II Films and Patriotism in America

Breanna Fehlman
Ouachita Baptist University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fehlman, Breanna, "World War II Films and Patriotism in America" (2015). *History Class Publications*. 30.
<https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/history/30>

This Class Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History at Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Class Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. For more information, please contact mortensona@obu.edu.

Breanna Fehlman

Dr. Hicks

Research Seminar

2 April 2015

World War II Films and Patriotism in America

In American culture, one of the most effective ways to communicate is through the media. The newest films and television shows being released have a large impact on our country's opinions. Therefore, the quickest way to reaffirm or change the public's perspective of a particular topic is by making a film about it. There have been many popular films made about almost every important event in history, but perhaps the most prevalent topic in historical films is World War II. It is especially important to study these films because, as film critic Vincent Canby said, "How war movies are accepted by the public reflects the times in which they're released."¹ Not only is it important to study these for a glimpse into the time they were released but it is also important to see how these films have changed the public's perception of the event being portrayed. Using these films, the directors have demonstrated their opinion on the selected topic, hoping to change the viewer's opinion to more closely fit theirs. Such World War II films have been said to "propound a fundamental American decency and dutifulness that is both poignant and indisputable."² It is especially important to study these films in order to see how the films have changed the viewpoint of subsequent

¹ Vincent Canby, "Critics Notebook: Saving a Nation's Pride of Being: The Horror and Honor of a Good War," *The New York Times*, August 10, 1998, <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/08/10/movies/critic-s-notebook-saving-nation-s-pride-being-horror-honor-good-war.html>

² Richard Schickel, *Good Morning, Mr. Zip Zip Zip: Movies, Memory, and World War II* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003), 295

generations of viewers, especially those not privy to the war itself. In order to look into this topic, I have chosen three of the most highly regarded and influential World War II films made since the war: *To Hell and Back*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *Band of Brothers*, which would all be considered “travelogue war movie[s]...which follow a character or group of characters through the historical events of the war.”³ While studying all aspects of the films are important, there are certain features of the films that are more important to look into. In looking at films made about the United States’ involvement in World War II, it is important to delve deep into the matter of the public memory of patriotism in this war and how these films have affected that memory, both in the time they were released and in the years since. The three films I have chosen tell different stories but all have the same end result: they leave the audience with a sense of pride and nostalgia about the bravery and patriotism of the soldiers that served in WWII. While newer films try to give a deeper look into the misery and sacrifices that were experienced by these men, they are still received by the audience in the same way.

The category of “war films” is difficult to condense into one genre because it could possibly encompass many different styles of films. However, as Thomas Doherty said in his book *Projections of War*, “While wars are more than simply combat, the films we call ‘war movies’ are almost exclusively films about combat.”⁴ Combat films, or simply “war films” to most Americans, have a very simple outline: “a diverse group of U.S. soldiers overcomes adversity, both external and internal, and wins.”⁵ This summary actually encompasses not only all of the films I have chosen to delve deeper into but most, if not all, of the American “war

³ Howard Hughes, *When Eagles Dared: The Filmgoers’ History of World War II* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2012), xi

⁴ Phillip L. Gianos, *Politics and Politicians in American Film* (Westport: Praeger, 1998), 115

⁵ Gianos, 115

films” that I have ever seen, proving that it is a popular and profitable formula for filmmakers to use.

The way war has been portrayed by the Hollywood film industry has evolved in the 50 years that have passed since the end of the war. With the exception of a small period where WWII films were no longer profitable, the genre has stayed popular. As Steven Spielberg’s biographer, Lester Friedman, says, “Wartime settings generally provide numerous opportunities for ascertaining, distilling, reinforcing, and sustaining key American ideals of appropriate behavior, valiant action, and gratifying achievement.”⁶ Friedman also says that these films remain popular because they show “American servicemen demonstrate[ing] their moral authority and earn their ultimate victory by fighting bravely, honorably, and fairly.”⁷ This genre has remained popular in American cinemas, especially after the resurgence of the genre in the late 1990s. The tone of the films themselves have gone through many changes as well, as new generations of Americans have come of age and the public’s memory has come into play once again.

The films that were released during the war or in the decade following it have a very distinctive spirit, “most of them celebratory.”⁸ 1940’s war films “painted a portrait of victory and competence, of American true grit overpowering stormtrooper discipline and samurai fanaticism.”⁹ Each of these films gives us an American hero we can “root for” and German/Japanese bad guys we can happily see our troops decimate. These films were simply

⁶ Lester D. Friedman, *Citizen Spielberg* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 182

⁷ Friedman, 183

⁸ Kenneth M. Cameron, *America on Film: Hollywood and American History* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1997), 72

⁹ Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 282

“morally weightless adventure[s].”¹⁰ Other examples of these types of films were *The Fighting Sullivans* and *The Sands of Iwo Jima*.

While early WWII films remained popular throughout the four decades after the war, Hollywood seemed to focus most of their attention on other wars and conflicts, namely Vietnam. These films were mostly anti-war films, with the exception of a few unsuccessful attempts to make Vietnam films look like those about WWII. The tone of the war films in this decade were especially negative, Examples of these anti-war films are *Platoon*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Full Metal Jacket*.

By the early 1990’s, WWII films were considered “box office poison.”¹¹ After a series of commercial flops made in the 1980s, no studio or director wanted to make a film about WWII. A vice president of programming at one of said studios went so far as to say “World War II is ancient history to the majority of the TV and movie audience-there’s nothing real about it.”¹² However, only a few years later, *Saving Private Ryan* was released, surprising everyone, including its director, with its popularity, box office records, and worldwide appeal.¹³

As World War II films have continued to be made into the late 20th/early 21st centuries, they have started to portray that even the heroic American soldiers of World War II were “capable of brutal, immoral acts.”¹⁴ In their book *American History and Contemporary Hollywood Film*, authors Trevor McCrisken and Andrew Pepper go on to say, “Even though

¹⁰ Schickel, 273

¹¹ Doherty, 300

¹² Doherty, 300-01

¹³ “Saving Private Ryan,” *IMDB.com*, Accessed 26 March 2015, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120815/?ref_=nv_sr_1

¹⁴ Trevor B. McCrisken and Andrew Pepper, *American History and Contemporary Hollywood Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 118

some of the more extreme American behavior during the war is not depicted, we are given a more 'warts-and-all' perspective in *The Thin Red Line* and *Saving Private Ryan* than we are in *Pearl Harbor*, *U-571*, and most of Hollywood's earlier World War II films."¹⁵ These modern films also give us a "more morally ambiguous portrayal" of American forces than the war films made in the decade after the war.¹⁶ This portrayal is shown in several scenes of *Saving Private Ryan*, including when American soldiers shoot unarmed German troops trying to surrender and a group of German soldiers being killed by American forces while trying to escape a burning foxhole.

While these films have tried to show a different side of American troops, Richard Schickel says that even in "modern" programs such as *Saving Private Ryan* or *Band of Brothers* viewers can "discern a...celebration of American dutifulness."¹⁷ However, Schickel also adds that in these modern WWII films, viewers are given "an awareness of war's inevitable waste and tragedy" that was not present in early war films.¹⁸

In addition to the overall tone of the films, another aspect that has changed in recent war films is the portrayal of the enemy, whether it be films about the western or eastern theaters. During the war, the portrayals made fools of the respective leaders of enemy nations. However, in films made recently, especially *Saving Private Ryan* and *Band of Brothers*, the enemy is not treated in a comedic way. While the perspective may be skewed in some aspects, the attitude towards the enemy soldiers is that, while ultimately dangerous to American soldiers, they were fighting for their country and were, in many instances, just doing what they

¹⁵ McCrisken and Pepper, 119

¹⁶ McCrisken and Pepper, 119

¹⁷ Schickel, 88

¹⁸ Schickel, 88

were told. This appreciation for the suffering of other countries adds depth not just to the films but also to our country's appreciation for the trials other countries experienced, even if they were against us in the war.

While looking at the war film genre and the changes that have been made to the formula for making a WWII film recently, viewers may wonder not only why this genre is still so popular many years after the war has ended but also why making films like these even matter in a time so long after the war has ended.

These films can help us learn how to filter the present through lessons from the past. In the book *Why We Fought*, the author brings up the example of American soldiers seen lounging in Saddam Hussein's houses and how we can compare this to "GIs barging into Hitler's Berchtesgarden at the end of World War II, which is highlighted in Stephen Ambrose's *Band of Brothers*." ¹⁹ Using films like this can help us understand important events or images by looking at similar events or images from the past.

Richard Schickel gives an interesting reason for the American fascination with the genre. For Schickel's generation, World War II was "the event that permanently defined and shaped [them], no matter how much longer [they] live on into the twenty-first century." ²⁰ Because of the importance of this generation and what they gave to our country, the celebratory nature of certain WWII films were "reinforced because the generation that fought World War II is passing from the stage... There is a desire to honor the fighting men of World War II while substantial

¹⁹ *Why We Fought: America's Wars in Film and History*, ed. Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 481

²⁰ Schickel, 295

numbers of them are still alive to hear our encomiums.”²¹ In order to fully explore the ways that these war films and the stories they portray have affected subsequent generations is to look at specific WWII films and the reception they received.

An excellent example of the type of “celebratory” war films that were released in the years after the war ended is the 1955 classic *To Hell and Back*. As Kenneth Cameron described it, this film was “an attempt to tell ‘the true story of the foot soldier as seen through the eyes of one,’ the one being the most-decorated soldier of World War II.”²²

To Hell and Back is based on the autobiography of the same name written by Audie Murphy, who is widely known as the most decorated American soldier in WWII. Murphy’s memoir details the battle and happenings that led to Murphy receiving the Medal of Honor, the highest honor an American soldier can receive. At first, Murphy declined the offer to play himself in the movie version of his book, instead wanting Tony Curtis to take on the role. However, at the director’s insistence, Murphy, who was 31 at the time, agreed to play his 19-year-old self. After the success of Murphy’s memoir and the legend of his military service, it was obvious to everyone involved that his book would make the perfect motion picture. Since Murphy had already appeared in 16 films or television programs before this time, it was decided that he should star as himself.. This added both legitimacy to the movie and a connection to the character felt by the audience. *To Hell and Back* furthered Murphy’s film career and he would go on to appear in over 51 programs before he died in 1971.

The director’s goal was not only to tell the story of Audie Murphy’s bravery but also to give the audience warm feelings about soldiers in the war, without truly delving into the

²¹ Schickel, 296

²² Cameron, 118

negative effects that war has on soldiers.²³ By showing Murphy's heroic actions during the war, the director could have been trying to show the audience the importance of the bravery of soldiers during a war. This was an especially prevalent theme in war films made right after the war.

Unlike more modern war films, the intended audience of this film was the generation of people that were alive during and right after the war, in particular people who were at home and did not witness battle. This film would be especially eye opening for those people that did not witness the horrors of war. However, like the footage shown to the public during the war, the film is not too graphic (in both violent and emotional terms) as to upset the audience at home. This film has also had an advantage over other films that were released around the same time: it is not only based on the true story told by the man that was there, it also features him starring as himself. That means that, while there are certainly artistic liberties taken in the name of entertainment, Murphy's character is more appealing emotionally and he gives the film a more realistic feeling because he is actually playing himself.

The values and ideas that this film embodies has to do with the importance of the job done by WWII soldiers and how Americans at home needed to see the truth (or the media's version of it). By creating a film telling a true story, these values and ideas are strongly pressed upon the audience and the American audience saw a somewhat realistic, albeit tame, version of what soldiers experienced. Thomas Doherty calls the film a "mind-boggling fusion of art and experience," going on to explain how amazing it must have been for the 1955 audience to see "the authentic combat hero in his own Hollywood combat film stand[ing] astride a flaming tank

²³ "To Hell and Back," *IMDB.com*, Accessed 26 April 2015, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0048729/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1

and act[ing] out the action that won him the Congressional Medal of Honor.”²⁴ In addition to the importance of American soldiers, the film also conveys Murphy’s “gung-ho, ‘up and at ‘em’ vigour”, lending to the audience’s conception of Murphy’s patriotism and bravery.²⁵ The entire film affected the audience, from the beginning to the closing, which Cameron calls “deeply moving” citing “the music, the young man, the knowledge of what it means to stand in harm’s way” as the director’s additions that add to the audience’s attitude at the end of the film.²⁶

While the film itself was enough to give the average American a glimpse into combat and the experiences of the American soldier, the production company and theaters showing the film decided to take the “movie experience” a step further. Universal urged theaters showing the film to try to obtain objects from the war or to hold troop parades when the film was released, in order to capitalize on the situation and make the film more popular.²⁷ Doherty even notes that “if Murphy’s private war was hell, the widescreen version held all the attractions of a holiday spot.”²⁸ While the film in itself was an educational experience, the release of the film was made into an “event,” which takes away from the true value of the film. However, according to Richard Schickel, “there is a natural human tendency both to nostalgize and glorify the events that occurred on...historic dates.”²⁹ While these attempts to bring in more audience members for the film’s release may appear cheesy or even uncouth, Schickel’s note suggests that this could have been the attempt of the studio to honor the memory of

²⁴ Doherty, 278

²⁵ Hughes, 145

²⁶ Cameron, 118

²⁷ Doherty, 279

²⁸ Doherty, 279

²⁹ Schickel, 295

WWII fighters in addition to bringing in more revenue. This appears to be a legitimate suggestion.

Launching the resurgence of WWII films in the late 1990's was Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, released in 1998. The film was expected to find a small audience and modest success. *Saving Private Ryan* eventually shocked everyone, Spielberg most of all, by becoming the highest grossing film of 1998, being nominated for eleven Academy Awards, and by being "the film that inspired the world to remember" WWII.³⁰ Howard Hughes also called this film a "tremendously influential film, which rejuvenated interest in World War II cinema and history, and created a boom in the production of war subjects for the cinema, TV and video gaming audience."³¹

Steven Spielberg, the son of a WWII veteran, was "deeply affected" by the "motion pictures made during World War II."³² Spielberg has directed several films over his long career that address WWII, though none more successful than *Saving Private Ryan*. Spielberg's biographer, Lester Friedman, goes so far as to say that Spielberg's films about WWII "reshape the national consciousness about World War II," which many directors have tried to successfully do for so many years.³³

Robert Rodat (who also wrote the screenplay for the Revolutionary War film *The Patriot*) wrote the screenplay, after submitting eleven drafts. His story was inspired by the true story of the Niland Brothers, which is extremely similar to the story told in the film. Spielberg, in addition to directing and producing, also participated in certain aspects of casting and even

³⁰ Hughes, 195

³¹ Hughes, 195

³² Friedman, 184

³³ Friedman, 188

held the camera to film many parts of the Omaha Beach Scene. He was determined to make the film (especially the aforementioned beach scene) as realistic as possible. Even if the film would have been rated NC-17, he insisted on releasing an uncut version, not wanting to dishonor veterans by censoring the violence. He has said in interviews that this film was a “passion project as a gift” for his father, who was a veteran that fought in WWII.³⁴ The film also reminds audiences that the men who served in WWII “deserve to be honored.”³⁵ Spielberg made the film even though he did not think it would be a commercial hit and was surprised when it grossed more than \$200 million dollars worldwide and became the highest grossing film of 1998.

In addition to his in-depth research, Spielberg also brought his prestige as a director to the movie – not just a director of high-grossing films but also of serious, historically based films like *Schindler’s List*. In directing this film, Spielberg was attempting to honor not only his father but also any veteran who had served in World War II. Many veterans commended Spielberg for his authenticity, attention to detail, and not leaving out any gory details, especially during the famous opening scene.³⁶ In addition to honoring these men, Spielberg wanted to tell a story – particularly one of a heroic, selfless company of men who put themselves in harms way in order to bring one soldier home to his mother. While several soldiers are shown acting in a morally ambiguous way, on the whole, the soldiers of this unit are shown to be brave heroes who unflinchingly set about doing their job. In a certain way, the film can be seen as altering the public memory of the heroic nature of soldiers in WWII, especially for the younger generation

³⁴ IMDB

³⁵ Rollins and O’Connor, 17

³⁶ IMDB

that Spielberg was trying to reach. The film carries out Spielberg's viewpoint by showing the characters in a practically holy light – even when a character does something bad, he is almost immediately forgiven by the audience. However, the film (and Spielberg in making the film) was trying to point out that, while these men were heroic, they were human beings and they did make mistakes, even leading to other men being killed in some situations.

Along with his surprise about the film's financial success, Spielberg was also surely surprised by the effect that it had on audience members, especially young ones.³⁷ In making his film, Spielberg was not trying to redefine the war for a new generation of Americans. He was simply trying to create "a tribute to the courage and sacrifices" of American soldiers during WWII, like his dad.³⁸ As Vincent Canby put it, "restoring the nation's heroic image of itself probably wasn't what Steven Spielberg had in mind when he was preparing and directing *Saving Private Ryan*."³⁹ In his biography of Steven Spielberg, Lester Friedman quotes Neal Gabler as saying that this film gave the audience a "renewal of patriotic fervor tinged with nostalgia."⁴⁰

Perhaps one of the most controversial and most famous scenes of the film is the 27-minute-long opening battle scene that details the invasion of Normandy, drawing much of its content from Stephen Ambrose's book *D-Day*.⁴¹ The authors of *American History and Contemporary Hollywood Film* make the case that this film "privileges American actions above those of others involved in D-Day and sends the distinct message to its audience that it was the

³⁷ IMDB

³⁸ Canby

³⁹ Canby

⁴⁰ Friedman, 222

⁴¹ Rollins and O'Connor, 308

United States that almost single-handedly won the war against Nazi Germany.”⁴² McCrisken and Pepper also argue that, in not giving the opening scenes any context besides labeling the day “D-Day”, the film “draws on our deep feelings for the GIs in order to rescue not just Private Ryan but also the good name of the war.”⁴³ However, whether this scene is being hotly debated because of the extreme violence or the focus on only American forces in the battle, the fact that this scene is dramatically different from any scene ever included in a war film does not escape the notice of the commentators. The authors of *Why We Fought* even comment that “these opening sequences lack the heroics that might be expected from such figures as John Wayne or Robert Mitchum in earlier war movies.”⁴⁴ After seeing the destruction portrayed in this scene, it is hard to disagree with their observation.

Another part of the film that has inspired much discussion is the characters that the film follows, from Captain Miller, who was based on a real person (a soldier who led his men bravely and honorably during and after Normandy), to the fictional men that make up his platoon. Using the story of the soldiers searching for Ryan and hoping to return home afterward, “Spielberg transforms individual patriotism from a collection of abstract concepts and jingoistic expressions into...concrete objects.”⁴⁵ Friedman maintains that a character performing a selfless act is “the surest method for characters to demonstrate bravery, gain redemption, and garner audience identification,” which is why many of the characters throughout the film are shown performing selfless acts, many times right before they are killed.⁴⁶ While all of the men

⁴² McCrisken and Pepper, 97

⁴³ McCrisken and Pepper, 98

⁴⁴ Rollins and O’Connor, 307

⁴⁵ Friedman, 234

⁴⁶ Friedman, 233

perform selfless and brave acts throughout the film, the character of Captain Miller is the special case and often the character who is most remembered from the film, perhaps because he is a type of character that is often seen in war films: “the common man called upon to perform uncommon deeds.”⁴⁷ The audience identifies with Captain Miller because he is the “everyday man” who is called upon to perform his duty for his country in a particularly brave and patriotic manner, suggesting to the audience that they, too, are capable of that type of heroism and bravery. This is contrasted with *To Hell and Back*, in which Murphy is shown as an almost God-like warrior. He is not portrayed as an “everyman” and, because of that, does not convince the audience of their capabilities in the same way.

The most poignant part of the film, and yet another hotly debated aspect, is the last line uttered by Captain Miller. The line, “Earn it,” is not meant for Private Ryan but instead “the callow inheritors of the sacrifice of the wartime generation, middle-age boomers and twentysomething Gen-Xers alike.”⁴⁸ At the end of the film, Spielberg was talking through Miller. Many people in the last few generations (specifically my generation and the one before us, who never experienced the war first hand) had forgotten not about the war but about what the war really meant to the generation that experienced it first hand. Using this line, Spielberg is reminding these generations to “earn” the sacrifice that was made by his father’s generation (those who fought in the war). Spielberg was also trying to point out that our generations have never appreciated the sacrifices of men like his father and he was going to use his film to make sure no one ever forgot again. As Friedman puts it, “Spielberg’s film called out for the post-

⁴⁷ Friedman, 235

⁴⁸ Doherty, 310

World War II generations to acknowledge the debt they owed to the men and women who fought to defend America during the 1940s.”⁴⁹

While many people have been especially critical about certain aspects of the film’s second half, many of these critics have admitted that the film does give a “relatively uncompromising view of what war does to individuals.”⁵⁰ McCrisken and Pepper continue by saying that “the men in the film are not portrayed as all-powerful hero warriors but rather as ordinary American men with inherent weaknesses they must overcome or at least confront in order to prevail in extraordinary circumstances.”⁵¹ They also quote Robert Kolker as saying, “The heroic male is under interrogation throughout *Saving Private Ryan*.”⁵² Obviously, the characters the film focuses on are complex, flawed, and sometimes even brutal, as shown in the especially realistic scenes showing “Americans dealing brutally with surrendering soldiers and prisoners of war.”⁵³ By showing the ambiguous nature of some American soldiers during WWII, Spielberg creates characters that are both more well-rounded and more relatable to the audience. Thomas Doherty makes the observation that “none of the characters in *Saving Private Ryan* are flawless, many of them do awful things, but from the film’s perspective, they do so almost unquestioningly in the name of good.”⁵⁴ This reinforces America’s idea of both bravery and patriotism, as these soldiers have served in order for us to have freedom, making them the ultimate patriots. While this film does examine a more in-depth perspective about American soldiers and their motives, most authors have suggested that the film does not show

⁴⁹ Friedman, 238

⁵⁰ McCrisken and Pepper, 102

⁵¹ McCrisken and Pepper, 110

⁵² McCrisken and Pepper, 110

⁵³ McCrisken and Pepper, 119

⁵⁴ Doherty, 122

the soldiers in a completely unbiased light. At the end of the day, we, the audience, still want to feel good about the morals of the men who served overseas.

By watching this film, the audience is forced to “question the grave toll [wars] take on the bodies, spirits, and souls of American soldiers.”⁵⁵ While the audience is forced to consider both the moral ambiguity of war and the conduct of American soldiers during WWII, especially in the first hour, most critics felt that the film “ultimately retreats into more conventional cinematic territory with the Americans emerging victorious and heroic.”⁵⁶ Many critics have also used the second half of the film to argue that the film shows that war is a horrible necessity and “enabled Ryan – and others like him – to lead a ‘good life’.”⁵⁷ Through *Saving Private Ryan*, these people felt that World War II is, once again, held as the model for which all wars fought by America should be based on. This, ultimately, is what modern audiences take away from the film, that “discrete acts of heroism and initiative by citizen soldiers assured victory” for America, not just during the Normandy invasion but during all of WWII itself.⁵⁸

While the film acts as a reminder of the experiences of World War II soldiers, it does not glorify war, nor is it an “unambiguous celebration of American bravery.”⁵⁹ In the film, bad things happen to good soldiers and honorable, brave, and patriotic men die. The film is merely honoring these men as the flawed, imperfect soldiers that they were; as much as we like to celebrate their legacy, we also have to admit to the fact that they were human beings and they made mistakes. Unlike early World War II films, Spielberg’s film is realistic in that it owns up to

⁵⁵ Friedman, 242-3

⁵⁶ McCrisken and Pepper, 120

⁵⁷ McCrisken and Pepper, 121

⁵⁸ McCrisken and Pepper, 306

⁵⁹ Friedman, 240

those mistakes and does not try to shy away from certain morally ambiguous actions. Spielberg does not try to answer the political questions of the war but instead chooses to focus on “how ordinary men struggle to maintain their balance and simply survive in the midst of the confusion and cruelty of war.”⁶⁰ Friedman concludes his arguments about the usefulness of Spielberg’s film and ones like it by saying that these films “provide valuable keys to understanding present events and guidance for future actions.”⁶¹ While films like these, and the ones that have come before them, should not be considered the epitome of historical truth, they can be useful tools to educate and fascinate future generations about the trials of the previous generations and they can be used to guide these future generations in problems they may face in the future.

The book *Why We Fought* also makes interesting points about the usefulness of the film, classifying *Saving Private Ryan* as both “an antiwar film [and] a celebration of courage in combat.”⁶² This celebration of American courage contributes to the feeling of patriotism that most audience members feel after viewing the film. The inspiring message of the film, that there is nobility in making sacrifices for a worthy cause, also contributes to the patriotic overtones. In addition to providing an inspiring message, Spielberg also “shows audiences that some battles are worth fighting, and the men who risk their lives in worthy causes deserve to be honored.”⁶³ All of these elements of patriotism that the film communicates combine in order to give the audience a greater appreciation for the patriotism of early generations and

⁶⁰ Friedman, 243

⁶¹ Friedman, 243

⁶² Rollins and O’Connor, 308

⁶³ Rollins and O’Connor, 309

increase the American audience's patriotic feelings toward their country and toward veterans of WWII, even many years after the war.

While Steven Spielberg created a masterpiece of visually stunning scenes and patriotic feelings, he fully perfected this formula in his 2001 miniseries *Band of Brothers*. Much like *Saving Private Ryan*, Spielberg was responsible for creating this miniseries, with the help of Tom Hanks, who starred in the aforementioned movie. *Band of Brothers* was based on the book of the same name written by Stephen E. Ambrose. This book (and miniseries) details the actions taken by Easy Company, part of the 101st Airborne Division, during World War II. Stephen Ambrose is the author of many other well-respected books about important American figures and events, including books about Lewis and Clark, Eisenhower, and Nixon. After the success of *Saving Private Ryan*, Hanks and Spielberg decided to create and produce another project that honored the lives of WWII veterans, this time focusing on a true story.

Through this miniseries, the creators were not just trying to tell an interesting story but also to honor the lives of the men of Easy Company, one of the most well-known and decorated units in the US Army. The authors tried to stay as close to history as possible. All three of the men that were responsible for creating the miniseries (Spielberg, Hanks, and Ambrose) showed the scripts for each of the ten episodes to the soldiers from Easy Company that the series was based on in order to guarantee reliability. Each actor was also specifically chosen for their part due to a "close physical resemblance" to the soldier they were portraying.⁶⁴

Much like Spielberg's other project, the goal of this miniseries is to show the heroics that were performed by Easy Company in WWII. In showing the bravery of the unit, the

⁶⁴ "Band of Brothers," *IMDB.com*, Accessed on 31 March 2015, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0185906/?ref_=nv_sr_1

miniseries also portrays the men in this unit as human beings – brave men but also men who made mistakes. While neither of these projects gives a glamorous view of the second world war, this project (possibly because it is ten hours long) is able to fully convey that the men in this company were not perfect and that they experienced horrible tragedies in addition to their many victories during their military service. As with *Saving Private Ryan*, the intended audience of this film is specifically the younger generations that were not alive during the war itself. By catering to this generation, the creators are altering the public's memory of the event, as much of the generation that was alive during the war is getting older and dying.

Steven Spielberg uses many of the same elements that he used in *Saving Private Ryan*, including big battle scenes, ambiguous situations, and intriguing, complex characters. However, in *Band of Brothers*, he uses all of these things in a grander scale and has perfected how to use each of these elements to both entertain the viewers and increase their feelings of nationalism. By using these elements in very specific ways, Spielberg has managed to create a program that focuses on exploring the deeper feelings and goals of these soldiers while still portraying them as patriotic heroes. In doing this, he has managed to make films that succeed in this way where many films released in the decade after the conflict, and even some released in the last few years, have not.

War films have served a very specific purpose in our country's history, depending on the year in which they were released. The films made shortly after WWII were about rationalizing the violence of the war and the loss that both soldiers and families had experienced. These films may have referenced the violence of war but rarely ever showed any of this violence explicitly. As films produced in the United States changed throughout the following three

decades, war films were expected to be anti-war, especially during and after the Vietnam War. However, after being separated many years from our country's experience in Vietnam, a resurgence of WWII films began in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which changed both cinematic history and public memory, especially toward the topic of World War II and America's participation in wars in general. These films, while more like their predecessors from the 1950's than the anti-war films of the 1970s and 80s, explored both similar and different aspects of the war, giving audiences a peek into the psyche and actions of the average WWII soldier. While all of these films can be considered important because they give us a peek into the culture and society of the era in which they were released, the films of the late 20th century are particularly important because they opened up dialogues, both with WWII veterans and about them. These dialogues gave new perspectives to younger generations that may have seen old WWII films but had never witnessed what these veterans went through, as they would through Spielberg's projects, to a certain extent. These films changed not only how the last few generations thought about WWII veterans but about WWII in general. Through their patriotic overtones and characters, these films convey to the audience how they should feel about their country's participation in the war. This is especially where the importance of these films and ones like them come into play. They are significant because, through films like this, a director can change the public's memory about a historical event and the particular groups of people involved. By paying attention to these films and what they portray to the audience, historians can witness not only what the director believes but, in the case of a monumental film like *Saving Private Ryan*, also what the public could soon believe. Such significant and popular films impact the public's memory and perception about the subject they explore, which is why it is particularly

important for historians to study these films and the effects that they have had and will continue to have on this and future generations.

Works Cited

- Cameron, Kenneth M. *America on Film: Hollywood and American History*. New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1997.
- Canby, Vincent. "Critic's Notebook: Saving a Nation's Pride of Being: The Horror and Honor of a Good War." *New York Times*, August 10, 1998.
<http://www.nytimes.com/1998/08/10/movies/critic-s-notebook-saving-nation-s-pride-being-horror-honor-good-war.html>
- Doherty, Thomas. *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- Friedman, Lester D. *Citizen Spielberg*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006.
- Gianos, Phillip L. *Politics and Politicians in American Film*. Westport: Praeger, 1998.
- Hughes, Howard. *When Eagles Dared: The Filmgoers' History of World War II*. New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2012.
- IMDB. "Band of Brothers." Accessed March 20, 2015.
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0185906/?ref_=nv_sr_1
- IMDB. "Saving Private Ryan." Accessed March 20, 2015.
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120815/?ref_=nv_sr_1
- IMDB. "To Hell and Back." Accessed April 26, 2015.
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0048729/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1
- McCrisken, Trevor B., and Andrew Pepper. *American History and Contemporary Hollywood Film*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005.
- Rollins, Peter C., and John E. O'Connor, eds. *Why We Fought: America's Wars in Film and History*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008.
- Schickel, Richard. *Good Morning, Mr. Zip Zip Zip: Movies, Memory, and World War II*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003.