

Auriel Del Carmen

The Historian's Craft

Media Review

### *Depictions of Omaha Beach*

Using media for historical views has helped audiences think of how the past happened visually. This could be a film, a documentary, a television series, or even a video game. World War II has always been portrayed in media every year ever since it started even literally during the war. One of the well-known events of the Second World War was the D-Day Landings in Normandy. It was the largest amphibious operation in history. For this paper, two forms of media will be compared to each other scholarly sources about landings on Omaha Beach, a YouTube documentary, and a feature film. There will also be an analysis of how the media sources and scholarly sources were both similar and different.

For this media source, a YouTube channel Simple History published a video “Omaha Beach (June 6th, 1944).” It explained the details such as the number of personnel who were involved in the landings, the logistics, and strategies from both sides on how to achieve victory on the beaches. Another media source is a great film called *Saving Private Ryan* which is about Captain Miller and his army squad go looking for Private James Francis Ryan whose mother has lost three of her sons during the war. He is the last surviving member and he needs to be sent home. The movie shows the opening scene depicting the landing at Omaha Beach with many landing crafts and thousands of soldiers about to step on the sand.<sup>1</sup> Over 1,500 extras were involved in filming the beach scene over four weeks.<sup>2</sup> The true scale of the whole invasion can still vary. Just on Omaha Beach alone according to the channel, the US Army engaged 43,000

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<sup>1</sup> *Saving Private Ryan*, Film (United States: DreamWorks Picture, Paramount Pictures, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Tom Nicholson, “Saving Private Ryan’s Terrifying Beach Scene Cost \$12 Million to Film,” *Esquire*, July 11, 2018

men of the 5th Corps, organized into 2 regimental combat teams, and 2 Ranger battalions to secure Omaha Beach. Other sources though such as the Department of Defense fact sheet mentioned that “The Americans suffered 2,400 casualties, but 34,000 Allied troops landed by nightfall.”<sup>3</sup>

According to the narrator, “On June 6, 1944, the Allies launched Operation Neptune, the biggest amphibious landing operation the world has ever seen. At Omaha Beach, US soldiers suffered the greatest difficulties in achieving their objective.”<sup>4</sup> The video depicted the landings violently even though it is animated showing soldiers getting shot at their landing crafts immediately when the ramps go down on the beach. Even though this channel may be educational, you might wanna watch it at the viewer’s discretion. *Saving Private Ryan* depicts the Normandy landings in a most realistic and brutal portrayal where you see soldiers getting shot for real right as the ramps go down from their landing crafts. You can see bodies being blown off, someone’s limbs disappearing, and a soldier getting headshot up close. These scenes were very realistic in that they triggered PTSD for many veterans who were at Normandy landings that have watched the film. According to War History Online, “In two weeks from when the film was first screened, the Department of Veterans Affairs had to increase staffing on its telephone counseling line, as numerous veterans were disturbed by the film and were compelled to seek professional help. There were more than 100 phone calls during this time, which was more than the department had received in years from WWII vets.”<sup>5</sup> Both depictions from these media sources can be supported by pieces of evidence of soldiers who were involved in the landings. Colonel S.L.A. Marshall, who was a combat historian at the time of Normandy

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<sup>3</sup> “D-Day by the Numbers,” *US Department of Defense*.

<sup>4</sup> Simple History, “Omaha Beach, D-Day (June 6, 1944),” YouTube Video, *YouTube*, June 20, 2019

<sup>5</sup> Nikola Budanovic, “Saving Private Ryan Depicted War so Realistically That It Triggered PTSD among Veterans Who Watched It,” WAR HISTORY ONLINE, May 11, 2018.

Landings described it as, “The ramp drops. In that instant, two machine guns concentrate their fire on the opening. Not a man is given time to jump. All aboard are cut down where they stand.”<sup>6</sup> This sentence describes the horrific experience the soldiers had to face on those beaches that day. Overall, both media sources and scholarly sources mentioned here accurately described the same events that happened during D-Day depending on the research and experiences. The only big difference between the two media sources is that Simple History uses animation to depict historical events while *Saving Private Ryan* depicts real-life events during World War II.

The violence depicted in both media sources may vary depending on the audience. Simple History channel can be watchable for audiences who can handle some scale of violence but blood and death are still shown on that video. Both media sources depict heavy artillery firing and machine guns firing down on soldiers. *Saving Private Ryan* will be too horrible for any young audience to watch that opening scene. In that movie, you can see a lot of organs blown open on a lot of soldiers. The scene also shows some soldiers drowning because either their gear is weighing them or the enemy firing on them. There are soldiers without any parts left on the lower half of their bodies. These all happened because of machine guns firing and heavy artillery fire being dropped all over the beach causing all these injuries and painful death. These events can be supported by soldier’s experiences on that day. From S.L.A Marshall’s description of what’s it like being hit by the enemy, “Williams and his crew of seven are the first Americans to approach the concrete pillbox on D-Day morning. Williams crawls forward alone, moving via a shallow gully, but is hit by three bullets from the machine gun which rips his rump and right leg.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, dying quickly may be a better option than just having to endure painful injuries. Another source from the National WWII Museum described the experiences, “Troops

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<sup>6</sup> S.L.A. Marshall, “First Wave at Omaha Beach,” *The Atlantic*, November 1960, 69

<sup>7</sup> S.L.A. Marshall, “First Wave at Omaha Beach,” *The Atlantic*, November 1960, 71

leaped from their landing boats and were pinned down for hours by murderous machine-gun fire that turned the beach into a vast killing field. “If you (stayed) there you were going to die,” Lieutenant Colonel Bill Friedman said. “We just had to . . . try to get to the bottom of the cliffs on which the Germans had mounted their defenses.”<sup>8</sup>

Another scene in both media sources right before the landings shows strong seas and cloudy weather. In Simple History’s video, the narrator mentioned, “The first assault wave on Omaha Beach was hampered by bad weather conditions and the lack of Sherman tanks. Many soldiers were killed instantly before they even reached the beach.” In *Saving Private Ryan*, you can notice some soldiers throwing up and feeling seasick on the landing crafts on their way to the beach because of the high waves. The next scene shows the soldiers being hit by machine gun fire and some of them had to jump into the waters. Weather was very important in making the invasion of Normandy possible. According to *D-Day and Geography*, “The first choice was 5 June, because the 4 June weather map looked like a day in December. The weather was bad and the beaches were mined and covered with pronged metal devices designed to rip out the bottoms of landing craft. The troops would have to go in three hours before the highest tide to sweep mines and other devices. The weather on 4 June was not encouraging: low clouds, reduced visibility, high winds, five-foot waves, and four-foot surf on the beaches. The weather cleared rapidly at 6:30 A.M., providing the initial assault troops with a wide window of opportunity. The weather was severe on the first day of the landings, and if the invasion had been delayed another two weeks, the landings would have been swamped by a heavy storm. The element of surprise had been a crucial part of invasion planning, and several deception schemes had been activated to divert the attention of the German war machine.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “D-Day: The Allies Invade Europe,” The National WWII Museum | New Orleans, 2000

<sup>9</sup> Mildred Berman, “D-Day and Geography,” *Geographical Review* 84, no. 4 (1994): 469–75.

Overall, both media sources greatly depicted the horrific experiences that soldiers had to face including getting painful injuries or a quick death, unfortunately. The big reason why media sources portray the same events differently depends on their main purpose. Simple History's video about Omaha Beach is a great recommendation for anyone getting to know more about D-Day easily but should watch it at their discretion. Simple History did great research on D-Day and there are sources under the video description that the channel used for. It doesn't show everything though as it is only an educational channel so there will be some inaccuracy. The movie *Saving Private Ryan* is a great depiction of what it feels like to be a soldier when you land on Omaha Beach on June 6th, 1944. This movie should be for more mature audiences. If one thinks that movie isn't realistic then how come the veterans who watched it were sadly experiencing PTSD and had to seek help with the VA? Scholarly sources mentioned in this paper further support the evidence that both media sources did a great job depicting the events of landing on Omaha Beach on D-Day. If the depiction goes beyond that, the audiences may think that the real events are purely fictional or too boring to watch. There are big differences though such as *Saving Private Ryan* is loosely based on the four Niland brothers who were believed to have died in combat, but one brother survived. The only inaccuracy I could find in the whole beach scene is that all the main characters in the movie never existed. According to this article, Fritz traveled to the 82nd Airborne Division area to locate his brother and learned that Robert had died manning a machine gun. The War Department brought home the sole surviving Niland son, Fritz, after the deaths of his brothers Preston and Robert. He served as an MP for the remainder of the war and survived the war.<sup>10</sup> In the movie, Private Ryan refuses to leave his post

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<sup>10</sup> Jeff Ballard, "They Gave Their All: The Sullivan Brothers and the Tragic Loss of the USS Juneau," *The Saber and Scroll Journal* 9, no. 3 (2020).

until they can secure the bridge from a German attack, and in the end, Captain Miller before dying tells him to earn his life which he does, and visits his grave.

In conclusion, these sources gave us valuable information and tell us the experiences of soldiers who gave their lives for their country whether it be inspired by true events or actual events. Even though the media sources gave us historically accurate depictions, they will never be perfectly historically accurate as media such as films were always made for entertainment purposes and YouTube videos such as Simple History were made for educational purposes. There is always a way to look more behind the scenes though, and it is by researching through primary or secondary sources but making sure it is reliable. Historical events can benefit a lot from media sources.

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