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Fm: [REDACTED]
Re: "Saving Private Ryan" 3/13/97 meeting
Dt: 3/13/97

Building The Mystery

Pursuing The MacGuffin

Steven paralleled the effort to find Private Ryan with a classic mystery template... whether it be Sherlock Holmes or Nancy Drew. The quest for the MacGuffin should be persistent and intense, filled with red-herring, false clues, and switcheroos. This will help to elevate us from a war story into a real mystery about who and where Ryan is.

Throughout the mission, the men (led by Reiben) should piece together a colorful but none-too-flattering verbal composite sketch of Ryan. We get the sense that they need to turn the abstract idea of Private Ryan into a living, breathing human being... in order to justify the mission to themselves. The real gut-wrenching twist could come in a sequence where Miller's team loses their first man as they attempt to cross the town past harrowing sniper fire to find a "Private Ryan." The proverbial "space in the jeep" is now open for the sought after private... a man for a man... but the horrible reality is that it's not the right man! This isn't a simple trade... there is still much further to go and more men to lose.

This existential and almost surreal realization darkens the mood of the men and their descriptions of Ryan as they now start to question the nature of the quest itself. We should get the feeling that there is a war being fought in the souls of our heroes as they desperately attempt to fit what they are doing into Miller's wartime rationale: sacrifice the few for the good of the many. Their immediate conclusion is that their mission isn't just a silly errand but rather a grave, philosophical injustice. Only towards the end of the journey do they realize it is actually a kind of salvation.

All Option Exhausted, Miller Just Starts Calling Ryan's Name

We all liked the idea that Miller, with no other leads, clues, or options, simply starts calling Ryan's name. However, for this scene to play at its best, we need to show one more failed moment of trying to find Ryan before Miller throws caution to the wind. The sense is that they have exhausted all leads, followed what they thought was the trail, put together the clues... and now they are still nowhere. Miller's bizarre (but also strangely obvious) action is the only thing left to do.

The Mythology Of Who Miller Is

There was a real emphasis in Rodat's draft (although it went on a bit too long) of creating a mythology about Miller... where he's from, what he did before the war, and why his hand shakes. Much like the mystery of Ryan, the men attempt to piece together clues to figure out these secrets. We, the audience, learn about Miller from what the men say about him... and should also be guessing along with them. When it is finally revealed that Miller was an English teacher, we should look back and say, of course! All the clues were there in front of our face! Miller treated his men almost like a class, giving tests, showing patience, asking leading questions to make them think for themselves.

Miller's Decency

We also discussed an interesting idea about Miller's secret which could be terrific if executed with a light touch: Basically, the cliché of this kind of movie is that a hero comes in with a secret that is dark or negative. However, Miller's secret, in the midst of this carnage and hellishness, is his own decency! At the start of this story, Miller has plugged into the rationalizations taught to a military commander: lie to your troops... sacrifice the few for the many... don't show emotion. Only after shedding this numbing mindset does Miller realize that saving a man's life might be the one decent thing he'll do in this war.

To look at it another way, if sacrifice is what defines a hero, then Miller must ultimately sacrifice his entire wartime coping mechanism in order to confront the war naked, as the man he once was. Only then can he go home. The tragedy, of course, is that he is killed just as he does this.

Sarge Gives Miller The Option To Turn Back

Keeping Miller's progression towards redemption in mind, what if there is one new moment in the story where Sarge sits down with Miller and offers him the opportunity to turn back? Perhaps he says something like: "It would be the easiest thing in the world to end this mission right now... just tell them we couldn't find him." However, Miller refuses to take this easy choice. Something compels him to keep going. Only when we see Ryan's face do we start to realize that Miller is pursuing his own redemption, the decency betrayed by his shaking hand. The simple, seemingly illogical task of saving Private Ryan's life will actually save Private Miller.

We think the line that saving Ryan might be the one decent thing to come out of this shitty war is a great start and would like to further articulate this theme of Miller's redemption for the audience.

Specific Scenes & Other Details

Miller At Field Headquarters

We discussed a few new ideas for this scene. First, as Miller enters, we should get some sense that the commanding officers know of his excellent reputation and accomplishments as a leader. Perhaps they even reference a specific battle in which Miller distinguished himself.

Another idea is that when Miller is asked, "how you holding up?" he immediately goes to the map and starts recapping the geography and movement of the battle for the generals in rapid, detached dialogue. He explains where troops were lost, how many casualties, what went wrong, and how these situations were handled. We get a chilling sense that this is a commander speaking technically to other officers... not a soldier who was out there watching his men die.

Currently there are three scenes where the message that "we've got to get Ryan back" is conveyed. First one general tells another general. Then, the Major tells Ryan. Then, Ryan tells his troops. We think we should omit the second one, cutting out of the Field H.Q. scene early... before Miller gets the specific order.

Secretaries Typing Death Letters

We love the idea of seeing the D.C. war room where literally hundreds of secretaries all type out the thousands of death notification letters that will be sent out around the country.

General Marshall Issuing The Order To Save Ryan

We liked the dialogue and choreography of the Rob Rodat version of this sequence, where the General Marshall character initiates the orders to save Private Ryan before we see Mrs. Ryan.

Miller Assembles His Men For the Mission On Page 32

We preferred the shorter, more urgent Rodat version of this scene where there is a battle already underway. We also liked Miller snapping through a list of possible men for the mission... learning that one is dead and instantly moving on to another.

D-Day - Miller And Brigs Have Heated Exchange On The Boat

Possibly, Miller and Brigs have a heated exchange early in the invasion, while they are still on the boat. We, the audience, invest in Brigs, thinking he will become a major character... only to watch him die moments later.

The Conclusion Of The D-Day Battle

Steven suggested a new way to structure the conclusion of the invasion sequence. Possibly, we don't end with the battle decisively won. Instead, we cut away earlier and depict the scenes of General Marshall and Mrs. Ryan. Then, we cut back to Miller and his troops. Just as they make it to a place where they're temporarily safe, Miller is summoned back to the field headquarters for this next mission.

Radio Communication

We wanted to make it clearer that the radios they had in W.W. II weren't good for more than a few hundred yards. This sets up the idea that Miller and his men physically have to go from one end of the town to the other to find the wrong Ryan.

Vernacular

We should also watch out for anachronistic Vietnam war lingo (like "hump it") and terms like "Krauts" which feel a bit cliché.

Wade Instructs The Troops To Kill Him

Steven had an idea for a new moment where Wade, who can't move his head, asks the other troops where his wounds are... so he can give himself a diagnosis! When he realizes how bad it is, he deliberately instructs them to give him an overdose of Morphine.

The Jitterbug Scene

We preferred the pre-battle scene in Rodat's draft where the soldiers allow themselves to dream about their ideal place to the current jitterbug scene. Ultimately, we'd like to stay away from the idea of soldiers dancing on the evening before the big battle.

There is, possibly, another way and place in the script to play a version of the record scene. What if, in the second act, the men stumble upon a bunch of French records? The men force Upham to translate the lyrics as they listen hungrily to the songs. Upham could even grow a bit disgusted, asserting that he's translated the chorus three times and it isn't changing. Perhaps the scene ends as they all sing together in French.

The Cemetery Scene

Steven would like to cut the opening parachute scene and put back the cemetery scenes, casting the old man so that we won't know who he is. He pitched a story idea that has to do with the physical layout of the cemetery... which only comes into view after you wind around a bend: As Steven hiked up the path leading to the cemetery, he saw an old man turn a corner and then fall to his knees, weeping. However, Steven couldn't yet see what caused this response until he turned the corner and was confronted by the memorial.

Incongruities And Memorable Details Of War

We also briefly discussed that so many war movies are remembered for the little, bizarre character details that fill every scene. Steven pitched an idea of a character who collects and saves all the pebbles he finds in his shoe. Throughout the story, you see him pick out a pebble, examine it for a moment, and then pocket it for his collection. He has a whole pocket full of pebbles that he picked from his shoe in W.W.II... complete with favorites. Possibly, we can come up with more of these simple, textural details.

"I Don't Know A Wade."

We loved the way this moment was revised!

The Cow Sequence

We thought the cow sequence might work better if it functions along with the mythology of Private Ryan. Miller's troops have already built Ryan up in their minds to be farm hand who gets up every morning to milk and feed the cows. Somehow, the cow becomes an extension or symbol of Ryan to the men. Possibly, we don't have to see the cow give birth. When the men realize the cow is pregnant they move on.

The Staging Of The German Prisoner

We all love the idea of a giving a face to the enemy in the character of this German prisoner who does something to help the team. He then should end up to be the man who, in the faceless chaos of combat, kills Miller. We'd like to change the choreography of the lighter scene so that Miller's team, down in the foxhole, has a B.A.R. gun pressed against the German's ass and their hands grabbing his belt. We think this would be more believable.

Letting The German Prisoner Go

Steven preferred that when Miller's team lets the German prisoner go there is a warm, almost comical feel to the scene. He pitched the following idea:

When the troops release the German, they blindfold*him and instruct him to keep walking straight for 100 yards. They then head off... but turn to see that, by a stroke of bad luck, the German is about to hit the only tree in the entire field! They make bets about whether or not he will hit the tree and then watch breathlessly. Will he? Won't he? He does not! The bet winners cheer. Money changes hands. But the contest is not over! The German trips over a rock, gets turned around, and then crashes straight into the tree. This funny, almost endearing moment coldly contrasts the feeling when the German blindly shoots Miller later in the story.
