

Saving Private Ryan

The five American soldiers in the ditch were staring up at the man who had saved them with shocked expressions. Then they shook their heads and laughed. Private James F. Ryan – twenty, Peyton, Iowa – wondered if these men had gone completely crazy.

The squad climbed out of the ditch and onto the railroad tracks. This farm boy who had rescued them was not aware of their purpose here. They had to inform him that he had lost his brothers to this war.

Private Ryan and several other paratroopers accompanied Captain Miller and his squad through the ruins of Ramelle. There were no civilians in this town, and the paratroopers, Miller observed, looked the same as him and his men: tired, dirty, and occasionally wounded.

Miller and his men didn't say anything to Ryan yet. They glanced at him secretly – he looked like an Iowa farmer. But they respected him because he had saved their lives.

The Ramelle bridge over the Merderet was narrow – a brick and steel structure on a stone base. Below it, the Merderet was wide and blue. Both ends of the bridge were blocked with piles of sand bags that had machine guns on them. Corporal Fred Henderson – twenty-four, St. Louis, Missouri – came out from behind one of these piles. He smiled as he looked at the small group of tired soldiers walking toward him.

“If you're our assistance, I may have to complain,” he said.

“I understand, Corporal,” Miller said. “I need to report to your commanding officer.”

“That would have been Colonel Jennings, sir.” And the corporal nodded toward the river bank, where two dozen covered bodies waited for a burial squad. Then he said, “I'm afraid I'm the highest-ranking officer we have. Henderson, sir.”

“I'm Captain Miller.”

“Why did you come her, Captain?”

“We're here because of him,” Miller said, pointing to Ryan. “We're looking for Private Ryan.”

“Me?” Ryan said in amazement, “Why ...?”

Miller was ready to finish this assignment. “James Francis Ryan? Iowa?”

“Yes, sir,” Ryan said, confused and a little worried. “Peyton, Iowa, sir ... What's this about?”

“There's no easy way to say this, soldier,” Miller said, and paused briefly. “James, your brothers have all been killed in action.”

“All of them?” Ryan asked. “Not all of them ... there must be a mistake ...”

“It’s not a mistake, Private. Thomas died on Omaha Beach; Peter died on Utah Beach; Daniel died more than a week ago in New Guinea... I’m sorry, son.”

The paratrooper said nothing. He thought about the boys he had grown up with – brothers he’d fought with and laughed with and sometimes hated and always loved. They were gone. He would never see them again. They had disappeared with Captain Miller’s words.

Removing the helmet, Ryan walked over to the side of the bridge and leaned against it. Miller and his squad looked down at their feet, not watching as tears came down Ryan’s cheeks. Ryan’s paratrooper friends stared at the river.

Soon the private wiped the tears from his eyes, dried his hand on his pants, and looked toward Miller. “How far did you come to deliver this message?”

“We came from Omaha Beach.”

He looked at them. “You came all that way – just to tell me this? Why? What’s this really about, sir?”

Miller walked over to Ryan, who was still leaning against the bridge. “They’re sending you home, son. We have orders to bring you back.”

Ryan’s eyes opened wide. “What do you mean, bring me back?”

“That’s what our orders are. You’re from Iowa. I don’t have to tell you about the Sullivans.”

“Ryan smiled a little and said, “I understand – if I die, I’m bad publicity.”

“Your mother has suffered enough of a loss ... You can have ten minutes to get your equipment and say goodbye to your friends.”

Ryan was confused. Miller turned to Henderson and asked, “Is there any chance that assistance will reach you out here?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Do your radios work?”

“No, none of them work. We don’t know what’s happening south of us.”

Then Ryan said, “I have orders too, sir.” The private wasn’t leaning against the bridge anymore – he was beside Miller, standing straight. He spoke firmly. “And they don’t include abandoning my position.”

Miller sighed and said, “I understand how you feel. I’d feel the same way if I were you. But my orders have priority over yours.”

“I don’t agree, sir.”

It had been a long day, and despite the sympathy he felt for this kid, Miller was getting angry. “Private, these orders come directly from General Marshall, Chief of Staff of the United States Army.”

“With all respect, sir,” Henderson interrupted boldly, “Private Ryan is right. General Marshall isn’t here to judge the situation as it is now.”

Miller frowned.

“Sir,” Henderson said, “our orders are to keep control of this bridge – at all costs. Our planes have blown up every bridge across the Merderet except for two: one at Valognes and this one. If the Germans take them, we’ll lose our position and have to go back.”

“I didn’t come to take you and your men off this bridge, Corporal, or out of this town. I don’t envy your job or doubt its importance, but you’ll have to do it without this man.”

Ryan was shaking his head, no. “I can’t leave them, sir. Not until assistance arrives. There aren’t enough of us now ...”

“Private, you now have five minutes to get your equipment and report back to me.”

Ryan was still shaking his head, no. “Captain, if I leave, what are they going to –?”

“Hey stupid!” Reiben interrupted angrily. “Two of us died trying to find you and get you home! You’d better come with us! I would.”

The blood left Ryan’s face. He looked at Miller for confirmation, and Miller nodded. Then he walked over to the sand bags and sat down.

“What ... what were their names? he asked quietly.

Mellish answered, “Wade and Caparzo.”

Ryan repeated: “Wade ... and ... Caparzo.”

The private repeated the names quietly to himself several times, trying to imagine these names as men – dead men. After a few minutes he said to Miller, “This isn’t about you. It’s about politics ... and your mother.”

But Ryan didn’t seem to hear Miller. “I mean, my life isn’t worth the lives of two others.”

The men in Millers’ squad looked at each other. They were confused and ashamed to hear Ryan express their own opinions.

The private gestured to the paratroopers around him. “These guys deserve to go home as much as I do – as much as anybody does. They’ve found just as long and just as hard.”

“Is that what I should tell your mother?” Miller asked. “Should I tell her that she can put another flag in her window?”

Ryan stared at Miller. “My mother didn’t raise us to be cowards.”

The captain stared at the private. “She didn’t raise you to lose you.”

“Well, then, you can tell her this. When you found me, I was with the only brothers I had left – the men in my squad. Tell her that I couldn’t abandon those brothers. You tell her that ... and she’ll understand.”

And the private stared at the captain.

Miller said nothing.

“I’m not leaving this bridge, sir,” Ryan said. ‘If you want to shoot me for not abandoning my position, do that ... although I’m not sure how you’ll explain that to my mother.’”

Ryan moved past Miller and his men and went behind the sand bags. He stood there beside a machine gun – in his position, ready to fight.

Extract from Hopkins A., & Potter J. ed. (2000). Saving Private Ryan. Penguin Readers. Pearson Education Limited. Essex.