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Veteran of Omaha Beach looks back on 'a terrible thing'

Graphic violence of 'Saving Private Ryan' could present emotional problems for some veterans, counselors say

By STEPHANIE DUBE
Staff Writer

Robert Edlin, a platoon leader in the 2nd Ranger Battalion's Company A during the D-Day invasion, says he probably won't go to see "Saving Private Ryan."

"I was there," Edlin said.

"Saving Private Ryan," directed by Steven Spielberg, tells a story about a squad ordered to find Pvt. James Ryan, whose three brothers were killed in combat within days of one another -- one on Omaha Beach, one on Utah Beach and one in New Guinea.

Edlin knows the real story of June 6, 1944.

"It was a terrible thing from the beginning. There were bodies everywhere. I walked over bodies of my own men."

Edlin, owner of Edlin's Auction in Corpus Christi, was 22 on that day that still lives in his nightmares.

He led 35 men onto Omaha Beach, but only four made it across, he said. After he got across the beach, he said he went back to try to help others.

"I went back and was wounded in the left leg with a burst of machine gun fire," he said. "Ten minutes later I got hit in the other leg. I have to truthfully say that I didn't do much, just used up a couple bullets."

But just months later his actions earned him the Distinguished Service Cross, the nation's second-highest award for bravery. On Sept. 9, 1944, Edlin sneaked a small patrol into the mightiest fortress on the Brest Peninsula. He threatened the fortress commander with a live grenade, leading to the surrender of 850 enemy troops.

Edlin, who was inducted into the Army's Ranger Hall of Fame, said his son and great niece told him Tom Hanks' character in "Saving Private Ryan" reminded them of him. But they also warned him that maybe he shouldn't go see it.

"I already have bad dreams," he said. "I would probably go see it and have nightmares for a while. If I haven't gotten over it (yet), I probably won't get over it."

The movie's violence reflects reality, said Abel Chapa, veterans service officer for Nueces County.

"It was graphic, but very realistic," he said of the movie. "It certainly brings out the horrors of war."

Near the beginning of "Saving Private Ryan," the film shows the body-strewn Omaha Beach after D-Day. The waves, red with blood, pass over countless bodies of fallen soldiers. Omaha Beach, with its high cliffs, presented a formidable obstacle for Allied troops. By nightfall of the invasion, the troops on Omaha Beach had gained a 2-mile beachhead at a cost of 3,000 casualties.

Chapa said it could be hard for veterans to watch "Saving Private Ryan."

"For people who served there, I think it would create flashbacks or old wounds that they would choose to maybe cast aside as a bleak period in their lives," Chapa said. "It is quite graphic. The face of battle and the face of maiming one another is not the norm."

Manuel Colomo, a counseling therapist with the Veterans Readjustment Counseling Center, agreed that the movie's realism could be tough for some.

"I haven't had any of my clients come and tell me that they've seen the movie yet," he said. "But I would think that it would upset a lot of the clients that I have, and I don't know if any of them would sit through it or even consider looking at the movie. It would stir up old feelings and memories."

Some veterans, he said, still have not recovered from the traumas of combat.

"Different kinds of stimulus in the daily environment can trigger flashbacks," he said. "I'm still treating veterans from World War II and Korea, even though most of my clients are from Vietnam."

Monica Garcia, assistant manager at Tinseltown Movie 16 in Corpus Christi, said that when the movie first opened, managers were told to stay by the doors and ask for veterans' responses after the movie ended. She said she didn't hear any negative responses.

Anticipating emotional reactions, the Department of Veterans Affairs kept a telephone hotline open during the weekend and received more than 100 calls.

Narciso Vasquez, 77, a corporal in the 290th Infantry's Company C who fought in the Battle of the Bulge during World War II, said he hasn't seen the movie, but through his volunteer work at the local VA clinic he has spoken to other veterans who have seen it.

"They say it's exactly the way it was shown in the movie," he said.

Of course, Hollywood always differs some.

Tom Hanks' character, Capt. John Miller, is fictitious, Edlin noted. "There were only two officers left on that section of the beach."

Edlin was one of them.

Just in watching previews of "Saving Private Ryan" on television, Edlin said he found errors in the movie. One of these errors, he said, was that Hanks wears shiny captain's insignia on the front of his helmet.

"Nobody would do that; that's an invitation to get shot," he said. "Of course, everybody got shot anyway."

Chapa says that although the movie may not be recommended viewing for veterans, it is a film younger generations should see.

"I certainly would hope that most kids in high school and college that have an opportunity to view this film would have a little deeper understanding of what transpired in that conflict," he said.

Colomo said the emotions in the movie can never be completely understood by those who haven't been there.

"Unless you experience something like that, you can't explain to someone what it's really like," he said. "It's like getting a tidal wave of emotions."

Edlin said he still remembers the people he served with on D-Day.

``If I do go to see the movie, it will be after all the hoopla has gone down," he said.

``I lost so many people that day who were good friends."

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