D-Day Filming: For Real. A Comparison of 'Truth' and 'Reality' in "Saving Private Ryan" and Combat Film by the British Army’s Film and Photographic Unit

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D-Day Filming – For Real.
A comparison of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ in Saving Private Ryan and combat film by the British Army’s Film and Photographic Unit

Toby Haggith

Steven Spielberg’s Saving Private Ryan (1998) is acclaimed for its realistic battle sequences. In part Spielberg achieved this realism by mimicking the style of combat film shot by Allied cameramen. But how does this representation compare with the real thing, taken by men under fire using basic, cumbersome cameras? The purpose of this article is to explore these differences and evaluate how these two different cinematic approaches contribute to our understanding of the Normandy campaign and warfare in general.

The release of Saving Private Ryan is regarded as a landmark in the history of war films, because of the visceral power and brutal realism of its treatment of combat, particularly in the opening 26 minutes which covers the landing of US soldiers on the ‘Omaha’ sector of the Normandy beachhead. For film archivists and historians privileged with an intimate knowledge of the film and photographs taken by official cameramen serving with the soldiers at Normandy, the hyperbole surrounding the release of Saving Private Ryan offered a fascinating opportunity to compare the feature film version with the ‘real footage’. Not only was this an interesting exercise in itself but it provided a context in which to screen this extraordinary official film in its unedited and mute state. Most members of the general public are scarcely aware that cameramen filmed at D-Day and their only opportunity to view this film would have been when it was incorporated in wartime newsreels or, more likely, in short and oft-repeated sequences used in television documentaries. The public was given this opportunity at two lectures I presented on behalf of the Imperial War Museum, at the Museum of the Moving Image and the Imperial War Museum, entitled ‘D-Day Filming – for Real’.

These lectures involved screening the first 26 minutes of Saving Private Ryan, followed by sequences of official combat film taken by American and British cameramen, concentrating on the reels shot by the British cameramen of the Army Film and Photographic Unit (AFPU) who landed on the Sword and Juno sectors of the Normandy beachhead. As with the lectures, this paper will begin with a discus-

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sion of the characteristics of the scenes on Omaha Beach in Saving Private Ryan, which will be followed by a brief comparison with some of the film Spielberg viewed when researching for his film. The rest and major part of the paper will compare Spielberg’s film treatment of the fighting at Normandy with the film shot by the AFPU cameramen.

Some have argued that this is not a fair comparison, as Spielberg’s film is set on the Omaha beach, a position overlooked by well-defended 100ft cliffs and thus a much more difficult and dangerous position for the American soldiers to assault than the Gold, Sword and Juno beaches, where the British and Canadians landed and where the AFPU film was taken. Although the situation at Omaha was deadly for the incoming soldiers, it was also very tough on the other beaches. Therefore the context in which the film was shot is not vastly different from the situation at Omaha. It is also a more similar experience than that of the American soldiers fighting in the Italian mountains or on the atoll of Tarawa, as they appeared in the films The Battle of San Pietro (1945) and With the Marines at Tarawa (1944), which so influenced Spielberg during the making of his film.

The American part in the Normandy invasion was comprehensively covered in official film. According to one historian twenty-three cine cameramen were assigned to cover the invasion, including two who landed with the soldiers. Around fifty 35mm cameras were also mounted on landing barges and tanks, forty-seven of which were subsequently smashed during the invasion. However, most of the film shot of the landings was lost when the ship carrying the footage back to Britain was sunk. As a consequence, although there is plenty of footage of Omaha beach some days after D-Day, there is very little of the landings on 6 June. All that exists in the British archives is a tantalisingly brief sequence in the Allied documentary True Glory (1945); certainly not enough on which to conduct a thorough study. However, the Imperial War Museum is the custodian of a large amount of film of the British landings, taken from at least eight different camera positions. As this film was shot in black and white, using cameras similar to those carried by US cameramen, it closely approximates to the film shot at Omaha.

What did Spielberg set out to achieve in the film?

By depicting the horror and brutality of war as truthfully as possible, Spielberg wanted to make a film that veterans could recognise and be moved by. In conversations with veterans, Spielberg was struck by the fact that they universally dismissed the cinematic recreation of war: ‘They all said, there were two wars fought, there was our war and there was Hollywood’s war’. In order to make a film that was faithful to their experience, he realised that he had to do more than simply reject Hollywood conventions for the ‘war film’, he had to break new and possibly dangerous ground: ‘I did not want to shoot the picture in a way that could seem like a Hollywood production coming to, you know, a simulation of Omaha Beach, and making a gung-ho Rambo-kind of extravaganza. I wanted this film to be in a way uneasy for audiences to bear through’. Although his other aims are dramatic and ethical and thus do not directly address our concerns about truth and reality, we need to mention them here. Firstly and paradoxically, Spielberg did not want the story to be ‘war is hell’, he wanted to find a moment of decency in that hell. Secondly, we must underline that for Spielberg D-Day is the historical turning point in twentieth century history. He sees it as the start of the Allied crusade that saved the world from tyranny and secured democracy.

Reception of the film

As can be seen from the reviews written at the time of the release of Saving Private Ryan, Spielberg seems to have been successful in creating a high degree of realism. Geoff Brown writing in the Times noted that Spielberg fought the war ‘with a degree of hard detail unprecedented in fictional cinema’. Significantly, and what must have been most gratifying for Spielberg, was the fact that the film was widely endorsed by US veterans. Even servicemen of the current generation were struck by the realism and even truth of the battle scenes in the film.

An RAF veteran of the Gulf War, writing in the Sun, felt that the film portrayed the battle on D-Day so truthfully that it had a universal application: ‘But next time Clinton decides to loose off a barrage of missiles he should watch this film. Because Saving Private Ryan opens one’s eyes to the fact that wars are not about governments, they are about people. War is not glamorous and safe, just brutal, cruel and bloody terrifying – and people die.’ So successfully were the battle scenes and especially the Omaha beach scenes recreated, that the Royal Marines who were extras in the film found the filming brought back memories of their experiences in the Falklands.
War.\textsuperscript{12} Even Neil Ascherson in a not uncritical review in the Observer, conceded about the Omaha scene: ‘At the end, almost anyone must feel, Yes, that is what it must have been like.’\textsuperscript{13} According to some reviewers, Spielberg was also successful in achieving one of his other aims, of abandoning his famed sentimentality and manipulative style: ‘he has come of age as an artist’, wrote John Wrathall in Sight & Sound.\textsuperscript{14}

How does Saving Private Ryan differ in its depiction of battle from other war films?

Spielberg’s aim was to bring the audience as close as possible to the experience of being in combat, even if he risked alienating members of his audience in doing so. In order to do this he broke some important conventions in Hollywood’s depiction of warfare. The amount of blood and gore is not new in cinema, certainly not in fantasy or science fiction, but it is unprecedented in a Hollywood treatment of a realistic or historical subject. The number of casualties is bewildering for the audience: wherever they look men are being hit by projectiles and with a randomness and rapidity that gives no respite. Moreover, the bulk of the dead are Americans; this is no ‘Rambo’ or John Wayne film, where every American death is repaid with a harvest of enemy casualties. Neither is death clean and instant: for many it is painful and slow; gaping wounds spill internal organs with the graphic detail one might expect to see in an operating theatre or a medical training film.

Another important Hollywood convention, even cliché, of war films and disaster movies is that the audience is given time to become acquainted with the characters before they die. Spielberg rejected this established dramatic technique, because he was less interested in the audience developing a relationship with his characters than with ‘building a kinship’ with all the soldiers at Omaha beach.\textsuperscript{15}

In order to recreate the experience of the fighting at Normandy, Spielberg and his colleagues went to great lengths to make the battles look and sound historically authentic. He consulted military and historical advisors\textsuperscript{16} and helped the actors ‘get into role’ by making them undergo ten days of basic military training.\textsuperscript{17} Most of the extras were serving soldiers or ex-soldiers who were not only familiar with weapons and combat exercises, but could help to choreograph the beach assault, the skirmishing and other aspects of the fighting in Normandy. In a rather macabre fidelity to truth, Spielberg recruited real amputees for the soldiers who became wounded. The sound is a particularly important and powerful aspect of this film and there was a great effort to ensure authenticity. For example, the sound-men did more than just use the correct ammunition and weapons when recording gun fire, they wrapped half a dead cow in a military uniform and recorded the sound of bullets penetrating the carcass.

These efforts to recreate the look and sound of combat authentically were admirably thorough and widely praised when the film was released; however, there is nothing novel in this approach to filming war.\textsuperscript{18} As far back as the 1920s and 1930s filmmakers such as King Vidor when making The Big Parade (1925) and Lewis Milestone during the production of All Quiet on the Western Front (1930)\textsuperscript{19} went to similar lengths to recreate the look of the battlefields of the First World War.\textsuperscript{20} Directors such as Abel Gance, King Vidor, Jean Renoir and Bruce Woolf also realised the value of employing veterans and serving soldiers as actors, extras and military advisors.\textsuperscript{21} This tradition continued after 1945, most notably when Daryl F.Zanuck was making his epic
about D-Day, *The Longest Day* (1962). In order to recreate the battle of Arnhem authentically, for *Theirs is the Glory* (1945), Brian Desmond Hurst probably went further than Milestone, Zanuck and the rest, when filming at the original locations, a year or so after the campaign had ended and with all the roles performed by veterans of the battle.

But the most interesting of the techniques adopted by Spielberg to recreate the look of battle was his attempt to produce a pastiche of combat film. Although previous filmmakers such as Asquith, Milestone and Stuart Cooper had followed this practice, none had done so with the thoroughness and technological sophistication with which Spielberg approached the problem.

Presumably because of the shortage of film taken at 'Omaha', Spielberg researched widely when developing his version of combat film. For the look of the film, he wanted to 'duplicate' the blurred and atmospheric photographs taken by Robert Capa at Omaha. The camerawork itself was influenced by the cine film shot by the US combat cameramen, in particular in *The Battle for San Pietro* (1945) and *With the Marines At Tarawa* (1944). *The Battle of San Pietro* covered the American battle in December 1943, to dislodge the Germans from the mountainous Lieri valley 40 miles south east of Rome. *With the Marines at Tarawa* showed the American attack in November 1943 on the Japanese-held Tarawa atol in the Gilbert Islands.

Spielberg noticed that in these two films the cameramen, quite wisely, kept very close to the ground. He also noticed that the camera wobbled and shook from the blast of the shells. Spielberg realised that by mimicking the verité style of the combat cameraman he could cut the distance between the camera and the audience: 'Hopefully if we've played our cards right and done our jobs, the audience will think, 'We were there". In other words, he could help the audience to 'feel like' a soldier or cameraman at Normandy. In order to do this he shot all the scenes with a hand held camera and used a 'shaker lens' to recreate the wobbles and vibrations created by the blast of shells and gun-fire. This technique was also used for dramatic reasons. As Spielberg explained, the constant movement: 'made the film nervous to look at, which is exactly the kind of feeling that the soldiers were feeling themselves.'

He was also quite prepared to let production values drop in order to recreate the immediacy and rawness of the combat footage. During interviews Spielberg stressed that he had not edited out the mistakes that occurred during shooting. Spielberg did not pioneer this technique, it was John Ford, when making the *Battle of Midway* (1942), who decided to retain a short sequence of the film thrown off the camera gate and out of frame by a shell blast, because he realised that it brought a powerful sense of verisimilitude to the film.

As well as including and even artificially creating camera movement, the *Saving Private Ryan* cameramen let water and blood fall onto the lens. In doing so the cameramen were committing the cardinal sin of making the audience aware of the camera. Even in the reflexive field of documentary, this particular technique could only appear in the most humourous and satirical films, but in commercial cinema such mistakes would be unacceptable.

In addition to this innovative camera style, Spielberg and his chief cinematographer Janusz Kaminski, introduced some technical changes so that the film stock itself had the appearance of combat film. They used less saturated film to make it seem like 1940s colour stock, and then applied a process to stretch the colours still further. Camera lenses produced during the war did not have a protective coating to reduce glare, so the lens coatings were removed which created flaring on the film. To further enhance a sense of realism, the degree of
shutter was changed from 180 to 45 degrees, which made the film crisper and more staccato.

**Comparisons between Pietro, Tarawa and Ryan**

There is not space here, nor is it the purpose of the essay, to make a detailed comparison of these films; however, it is necessary to make some general observations. On closer examination it is clear that Spielberg was unwise to base his version of combat film so closely on these two films. Many film historians have questioned the authenticity of a number of the dramatic scenes of combat portrayed in John Huston's *The Battle of San Pietro*. Jerome Kuehl recalled that one cataloguer ironically described the film as being 'entirely authentic except for the sections of reconstruction'. The suspicion is confirmed by the shot sheets of the out-takes of the filming at San Pietro, many of which refer to scenes of combat that were re-enacted. In the case of *With the Marines at Tarawa* the authenticity of the scenes portrayed has never been in doubt. The striking thing about *Tarawa* is the scope of the filming, which includes a number of scenes showing the US Marines firing their weapons and, in the same image, the target of their firing, including one unique moment in which Japanese soldiers can be seen fleeing a bunker surrounded by Marines. The point is that the kind of close combat filmed at Tarawa, illustrated by the scene described above, was rarely duplicated outside the Pacific theatre, suggesting that the topography and fighting at the Atoll were not applicable to Normandy.

As we have seen, Capa's dramatic photographs at Omaha were of great influence in the look and film technique which Spielberg developed for the beach scenes. He was struck by the blurred, distorted images of the soldiers close to shore, a result, he thought, of Capa's agitation and movement under fire. In fact the reason for the blurred images was a mistake by the film developer who 'cooked' the negatives. There should have been no reason for camera shake to spoil the images at Omaha because Capa used a Contax, a camera with a very fast shutter. Although as Capa ironically noted, caption writers at the time turned this error into a virtue by explaining that the cameraman's hands had been shaking badly.

**The AFPU**

Now let us compare the two film versions of the D-Day landings and see whether *Saving Private Ryan* still stands up to the claims of truth and reality made for it. But first I will provide some background to the British filming on D-Day, including brief details about the cameramen, their training and the equipment they carried.

Seven cameramen of the No.5 Section of the AFPU were given the job of going in with the first troops to assault the beaches at around 7.30 a.m. on 6 June. They were Captain Lesley Evans and sergeants Desmond O'Neill, William Greenhalgh, Norman Clague, lan Grant and George Laws. Because of the danger, the cameramen to go in with the first troops were asked to volunteer. Slightly later, Sergeants Ernest Walter and Richard Leatherbarrow landed at Nan-Red sector of the Juno beach near the village of St. Aubin-sur-Mer, about 30–45 minutes after the first wave of Canadian troops.

In line with the selection policy set up for No. 5 Section, all the cameramen at D-Day had been serving soldiers before their training at Pinewood and some like lan Grant and Jimmy Mapham had been in the thick of the action, at Dunkirk and North Africa respectively. The other criterion was for film or photographic experience. Billy Greenhalgh had been a professional cameraman in civilian life, Leatherbarrow an apprentice portrait photographer and O'Neill had been a trainee press photographer. Although film and photographic experience was desirable, it was clearly not essential, as some of the cameramen who were accepted and successfully
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inducted into the AFPU had no professional experience of camerawork. For example Ernest Walter could only describe himself as a keen amateur photographer. It should also be noted that few of the cameramen at D-Day had any experience with cine-cameras before their training at Pinewood.

The AFPU training course at Pinewood lasted for three months and involved both still and cine photography. The recruits were taught how to set up quickly (focussing and setting the lens aperture) and to speed load in half a minute. They were also given instruction on camera aesthetics relating to shot-composition and to consider the role of the editor by abiding by basic cinematic conventions about ‘not crossing the line’ or altering the eye-line. They were taught to shoot in such a way that the pictures could be used in a newsreel. Therefore they were shown how to develop a simple story and use a logical structure of shots – long establishing shot, mid-shot for interest and close-ups for detail.

Naturally they could not anticipate action on the battlefield, but to ensure nothing was missed and to keep an eye out for danger, the cameramen were taught to film with both eyes open. They were also shown how to edit in the camera, a technique that encouraged careful shot selection as well as being particularly important for cameramen working in the field with an uncertain supply of film stock. A good example of both these techniques came on D-Day, when Sergeant Grant spotted a landing craft that had been hit and was on fire: he stopped filming and re-framed the camera on to the new subject and then started running the film.

Most of the cameramen were issued with the De Vry camera, but some were given the new British-made Vinten Normandy. Both cameras were heavy, clockwork-driven machines that took loose spools of 35mm film (see previous article in this issue by Kay Gladstone). In addition to the cine camera, the AFPU men on D-Day carried a Voigtlander Bessa stills camera, ten 100ft cans of film, a book of Dope Sheets to note down the contents of every roll, a small chalk board to ‘slate’ each sequence and a .38 Webley revolver. All this was in addition to the army pack. Cameramen were issued with a rimless helmet for ease of focussing.

There were no rules about what to shoot or what to exclude. The only instructions were to stay with the unit to which they had been assigned, secure a comprehensive record of its activities and to get as close to the fighting as possible.

D-Day

The cameramen joined their units a couple of weeks before D-Day. This gave them the chance to get to know the men they would be filming and most importantly the officer in command. In general the officers were sympathetic to the cameramen and gave them a great deal of assistance. Lord Lovat and Pip Roberts, the officers in command of the units to which Grant was attached in Normandy, were in favour of filming and instructed all their officers to give Grant every assistance. The fact that the cameramen were members of the Army and had seen action probably helped overcome suspicion. On passing out at Pinewood, all cameramen were given the rank of sergeant, which while hardly exalted, gave them some superiority over most of the soldiers. But most preferred to negotiate with the occasional soldier or officer who was obstructive, and if their powers of persuasion failed they could show the SHAPE pass signed by Eisenhower, which they all carried. While waiting for D-Day, the cameramen filmed some valuable and atmospheric scenes in the holding camps on the south coast; these included a sports day to help the men relieve the boredom and tension. They also received detailed instruction on the topography of the beaches where they were to land.

All the scenes shot by the AFPU cameramen and discussed in this essay, took place either at the Sword Sector of the Normandy beachhead where units of the British 3rd Division and the Commandos landed, or at Juno beach where the Canadians went in first. Sword was at the Eastern end of the Normandy beachhead. The landings at Omaha beach where Saving Private Ryan is set, took place to the west of the British and Canadian sectors.

The cameramen embarked with their units on the night of 5 June. The seas were very rough, and this combined with general nervousness, the smell of diesel, and other men being sick was extremely unpleasant. The smell drove Grant out of the hold of his landing craft onto the deck. During the crossing the cameramen filmed scenes on board, of men eating their rations, preparing their weapons, and of the other boats in the armada. Grant recalled trying to build up sequences of the armada as they had been trained at Pinewood, tilting up from the wash of the boat to the convoy, to aircraft flying overhead, etc.

What follows is an account of the filming of three of the cameramen at Normandy, which com-
Tob Hacith combines a description of the action portrayed in the films held in the Imperial War Museum and the cameramen’s own recollections of D-Day.

Sergeant Desmond O’Neill crossed with the 13th/18th Hussars and landed at Roche de Lion, about eight miles from Caen. As his boat approached the shore he filmed a vehicle on the beach blazing fiercely and a ‘wading tank’ close by. The first thing he noticed, apart from the well-raked beach, was a headless infantryman and then other dead and wounded soldiers in the sand hills near the top of the beach. Once out of his half-track, O’Neill filmed other troops coming ashore and moving towards the beach exits, a fully-laden ‘landing craft tank’ on fire, and was lucky to get a dramatic, classic propaganda pose of two British soldiers with a German prisoner. The beach then came under shellfire from artillery inland, and rifle and automatic fire from the beach defenders. O’Neill filmed a tank on fire until warned off, because of the danger of an explosion. He then tried to get off the beach, which was very difficult as it was mined and the exit blocked by a ‘flail tank’ that had been hit. As the beach was becoming more congested by troops and vehicles coming ashore, O’Neill linked up with some other troops trying to find a way off. Shortly after, O’Neill came under fire from a machine gun and was wounded in the elbow. (The soldier alongside him was killed.) The wound forced him to return to England. 37

Sergeant Ian Grant landed on the beaches at Ouistreheam with Lord Lovat’s Royal Marine Commandos. As they approached the beaches he was overwhelmed by the noise of the battle, the rockets, machine-gun fire and the guns from the Allied shipping. Although he was scared, the air of aggressive confidence possessed by the commandos was reassuring. He also found that the quality of the training he had received at Pinewood helped him to concentrate on his role when in the thick of the action. Grant’s unit came in on an LCT, which meant that the commandos had to disembark via two narrow ramps, fixed to the corners of the craft. One got swept away and Grant had to slide down on his bottom. On the beach he found that he had run out of film and had to find a shaded spot behind a knocked-out tank to reload. He carried on filming scenes on the beach until Lord Lovat’s commandos moved off for their main objective, Bénouville bridge. 38

Sergeant George Laws was with the commandos of No. 4 Brigade and No.1 Special Brigade, which embarked at Southampton and landed at Ouistreham. Seven miles from the French coast and in heavy seas, the men in his boat transferred to assault craft via scrambling nets, a procedure new to Laws. Approaching the shore he filmed the Norwegian destroyer Svenner, which had been hit and was sinking. He placed his camera in the waterproof bag and when he dropped into the water near the beach, it came up to his legs. Unfortunately he found that the camera had turned itself on during the landing, and 30 feet of the film had wound through. They were under constant heavy fire; in fact the leader of his commando unit was shot in the head and leg, right next to Laws. At the top of the beach the men re-grouped and Laws had time to re-load with a new film, a difficult procedure with wet, sandy fingers. The spring on the camera broke, after he had shot only about 400 feet of film and until he could get it fixed he had to use his stills camera. He then went off with the commandos to cover the attack on the gun battery. 39

Common characteristics

As this brief narrative shows, although there are differences between the films taken by the various cameramen, they do possess a remarkably similar structure. As the boats approached the shore, they took shots of their own landing craft, with mid-shots and close-ups of the soldiers preparing to face action and sequences of the approaching beaches and other landing craft. None of the cameramen filmed the actual landing, although Sergeant Grant did
somewhere manage to take a sequence from the top of the landing craft of the commandos clambering down the ramps on to the beach. Once ashore, most cameramen took shots of men disembarking from other landing craft and/or advancing up the beach. Typically the next sequence was taken at the top of the beach as the men regrouped before moving through the exits and inland. Subsequent scenes varied depending on the objectives to which their units were assigned.

The difficulties of filming at D-Day severely limited the kind of shots the cameramen could film. Because of the danger of dropping the camera or getting it wet, they could not risk filming the dramatic moments as the landing craft beached and the men went ashore. Instead they carefully stowed their cameras in the waterproof bags provided for this purpose. By chance, the design of the landing craft carrying the majority of the AFPU cameramen at Normandy, necessitated the men disembarking via a precipitous ramp fixed to the top of the craft, rather than charging out of a ramp in the bows of the boat. In fact only the official film shot on the beaches where the Canadians landed, shows the men disembarking as in Saving Private Ryan, and that was possible only because the landing craft had been fitted with an automatic camera.40 Those responsible for overseeing the filming anticipated the difficulties, so cameras were mounted in the aft end of around six of the British landing craft, which were to be operated by the coxswain via a button at his side.41 Laws, who was on this kind of craft, known as ‘landing craft assault’ thought it was too crowded to film the actual landing; although he did manage to take a powerful sequence of the other thirty or so men in the boat as it approached the shore.

Once ashore, the cameramen were anxious not to lose touch with the men of their units, which gave them very little time to get a range of shots and set-ups. There was also no chance of asking the soldiers to pose or re-stage some action. Being under fire also constrained and limited their filming options. Sergeant Ernest Walter had to take shelter behind a sea wall almost as soon as he came ashore, because of the mortar and machine gun fire coming from the German positions, and got no coverage of the beaches until he returned later in the day when things were quieter. Equipment problems for Laws and Grant, meant that they lost precious time reloading and winding their cameras. The time Laws lost in re-winding his camera came at a critical moment and, as a consequence, he was unable to get the key shot of commandos disembarking from other boats.

For all these reasons, shots of the ‘action’ and ‘drama’ at Sword and Juno, seem rather muted, especially in comparison with the action-packed scenes in Saving Private Ryan. In fact, one must not be surprised if some members of an audience find the rolls of AFPU film disappointing, even dull, particularly when they have just been exposed to the Normandy landings as presented in Saving Private Ryan, as has happened during the lectures that I have given. Apart from the admiration that the viewer feels for the cameramen in managing to film anything under such extreme conditions, it is difficult not to reflect that the Spielberg version of D-Day is a more impressive account of the event. Interestingly, this is not just a view held by the uninitiated cinema-goer: after D-Day the actual combat footage selected for a film of the invasion to be screened to General Eisenhower and his staff was not considered dramatic enough, and so the editor at the public relations section of SHAEF enlivened it with footage shot in England of the pre-invasion exercises.42 However, we cannot just leave the matter there; we need to explain why these two versions are so different. Moreover, in doing so, the viewer can gain a greater appreciation of the subtle qualities of the raw combat film and of its value to our understanding of warfare.

The simplest way to point out the differences between the AFPU combat film and Saving Private Ryan is to ask the question: How can we tell the AFPU combat film is real?

**Colour and sound**

All the combat film taken by the AFPU was shot on black and white stock. This does not of itself mark out its authenticity. It was a common misconception that the Second World War was filmed in monochrome, at least until recent television programmes such as World War Two in Colour. Colour film was used widely by amateur cinematographers and in a handful of British made feature films. However, largely because of cost, it was rarely used by the British military and usually only for training or for weapons trials. American combat cameramen used 16mm and sometimes 35mm Kodachrome stock in a small number of campaigns and it appeared in some of the most important official documentaries, the first being The Battle of Midway (1942), directed by John Ford.43 At Normandy, cameramen with the
Camera position

The position of the cameramen in relation to the action is a much more telling indication of the authenticity of combat film. If it is 'real' or shot live, the cameraman generally takes shelter and keeps low, out of the line of fire. As Sergeant Laws succinctly put it, 'In battle you don’t get much elevation, I mean its not very sensible'.\(^{43a}\) Sergeant Walter remarked that he always liked to be next to a wall or a tank because he felt safer. The AFPU back in Britain complimented him for the interesting low angles he achieved as a result of this technique, born out of a sense of self-preservation.\(^{44}\) During the Omaha beach scenes in *Saving Private Ryan*, the camera generally films from a low position, accurately copying the soldiers and combat cameramen. However, this is not always the case, especially when Spielberg wants to reveal a German position or show the sweep of the beach. For example, the audience is given a number of views of the Americans on the beach through the slit of a German machine gun post. This scene breaks the whole illusion that Spielberg has so effectively created up to this point. The camera can no longer be in the mode of ‘point of view’ or, if it is, the ‘point of view’ has now switched to that of the beach defenders. Back on the beach itself the camera frequently views the Americans away from the ‘cover’ of the beach obstacles and from ‘dangerously’ elevated positions. The most inconsistent sequence in *Private Ryan* occurs when the camera looks back at Tom Hanks, as he uses a mirror attached to his bayonet to see around a pill-box at an elevated machine-gun position.\(^{45}\)

For similar reasons cameramen do not, or rarely and usually only by accident, get in front of or between the action. Because of the confusion of battle and the mobility and commitment of the AFPU cameramen, they did occasionally lose touch with their units and found themselves effectively in no-man’s land, but in such circumstances filming was of low priority. As a result, in AFPU combat film, the enemy is never seen fighting - only as a corpse or as a prisoner. But towards the end of Spielberg’s version of the Omaha landings, once the Americans have got to the top of the cliffs, there is a long sequence of Americans weeding the defenders out of their pill-boxes. During these scenes the camera alternates between ‘ducking’ behind cover with the US Rangers, to filming in no-man’s land; at one point taking up a position directly in the line of fire of some riflemen, and in another filming at the end of a trench

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**Fig. 5(upper).** A still from film shot by George Laws at Sword beach, demonstrating the necessity of filming from a low angle when in combat. [Imperial War Museum: MH 2346.]

**Fig. 6(lower).** O'Neill’s lucky propaganda shot of a German prisoner captured at Sword beach. The only other state in which cameramen encountered the enemy was when they were wounded or dead. [Imperial War Museum: IWM FLM 3527.]

US Coast Guard did shoot some colour footage, but the only colour film shot on the beaches was filmed privately by the Hollywood director George Stevens, using a new 16mm Kodak film, and some days after D-Day.

The fact that the AFPU film is silent does not of course tell us it was real or depicted real events; there were plenty of reconstruction’s or faked battle scenes shot by combat cameramen where the sound was post-synched. All combat film had to be shot mute because sound recording equipment was so cumbersome. However, as I will discuss later, an absence of sound does make this a very inadequate representation of the truth of battle.
along which some German soldiers are rushing to escape a machine gun.

**Technical quality**
The technical quality or production value of film taken by the AFPU is not consistent. Lights could not be taken into battle, let alone used or powered. As a result the cameramen had to rely on the vagaries of natural light. For AFPU cameramen the slow film they used meant that filming in poor light was practically impossible. This, combined with the fact that all adjustments to the exposure had to be based on judgement, led to occasional mistakes. The dope sheets in the Imperial War Museum’s Film and Video Archive include many remarks by cameramen lamenting the fact that images were partly or totally invisible due to exposure problems. Moreover, although the AFPU camera equipment was quite robust, it did develop faults which affected the image. Even though Spielberg proudly boasted of leaving the production errors in, the exposure of the image in Saving Private Ryan is always even and the picture details are clearly seen.

Cameramen serving with the AFPU were equipped with a tripod, but due to its poor design and the impracticality of setting it up in the field, practically all the action scenes were filmed hand-held. They were taught to hold the camera steady when filming and would brace themselves where possible against a firm object. Although the viewer is aware of the occasional wobble or shake because of a tank rumble or shell explosion, there are remarkably few. The camera in Saving Private Ryan, shakes far too much. It also moves too much, swooping and ‘spraying’ around in a style that film archivists have come to associate with the poorly skilled amateur cinematographer. AFPU cameramen were taught to frame carefully and pan judiciously in order to save film and ensure that the images were of a high enough standard to do justice to the soldiers whose actions they were recording. Ironically, in trying to mimic the perceived low-production values of combat cameramen, Spielberg actually misunderstood their whole approach, which was to maintain a high standard of filming despite the terrible conditions. It should also be noted that the cameramen had their own professional aspirations: at the least they could hope that their film might be incorporated in a newsreel and at best be used in a prestigious official production such as Desert Victory.

**Lack of action: the pressures against faking**
The spectacle of the Normandy invasion made a great impression on the cameramen. Sergeant Grant recalled the scene on the English south coast on the afternoon of 5 June as epic in scale: ‘even Hollywood could never have planned it or laid it on by script, such a departure’. However, they were frustrated by the difficulties of trying to do justice to the event. Not only were they constrained by the problems of filming under live fire and the technical limitations of their camera equipment, they also relied so much on luck. If it is a truism that life is unpredictable, this is probably even more so during battle. Although things were going on all around them, they could not anticipate ‘action’. Sergeant Laws complained how everything happened too quickly to catch on film. For example, both the sergeant major and the commander of his unit were shot right next to him, dramatic moments in a battle which he would have liked to have recorded. He also missed an exciting shot of the beach being strafed by a German plane. To film an explosion was very unusual. The only way to have recorded such random events was to keep the camera running, something Laws knew he could not do because of his limited film stock. The British cameramen could only carry 10 minutes of film at D-Day and they had no idea when their supply would be replenished. By contrast Spielberg’s battle scenes are carefully choreographed and rehearsed so that every frame is jam-packed with action.

To overcome this intrinsic problem of filming live action, AFPU cameramen might have adopted the techniques of the feature filmmaker, by reconstructing scenes of action. During the First World War, official cameramen had occasionally reconstructed scenes of combat to give audiences at home a full impression of the nature of trench warfare. This practise continued into the Second World War, particularly during the North African campaign where newsreel cameramen became notorious for faking many sequences of combat to make newsreel and propaganda films more dramatic and exciting. While a valid argument can be made for such faking – or as film historians have more respectfully preferred to call it ‘improving’ or ‘reconstructing’, at D-Day things were simply moving too fast and the situation too dangerous to re-stage such scenes. It would have been impossible for the cameramen to have persuaded the soldiers to take time out for acting; both Walter and Laws commented how alone
they felt once they got ashore and the soldiers rushed off to do their jobs and left them to undertake theirs. Moreover, the ethos of No. 5 Section of the AFPU, as propounded by Colonel Hugh Stewart, discouraged the re-staging of action. Stewart disapproved of the ‘faking’ that had been so widely practised by newsreel cameramen in the Desert and would not let it creep into the work of his unit. He also believed that ‘faking’ was bad for the cameraman’s morale: ‘because if they thought they could get away with shooting phoney material, what incentive was there for them to go out and get the real thing, which is what they are there for?’ Therefore cameramen trained at Pinewood were specifically told to indicate in the dope sheets if they ever re-staged a sequence. Grant suggested that this insistence that cameramen filmed live action would help to explain the high number of casualties sustained by the unit. This rule seems to have been so well absorbed that reconstructions are rarely if ever mentioned in the dope sheets of the A700 film series (which covers the filming of the campaign in North West Europe). Sergeant Palmer was even careful to add a humorous note in his dope sheet of 4 August, to ensure that the viewer was not misled by a dramatic moment which befell a soldier leading his platoon along a wooded road in Normandy: ‘(PS: The death scene was laid on by an over-enthusiastic subject)’. The unfortunate man had turned round to address his men and at that moment had put his foot in a hole on the roadside and fallen over, a piece of accidental slapstick that might be confused for a more serious cause such as a sniper’s bullet. This adherence to the guidelines on faking is also an indication of the cameramen’s sense of honour and obligation to the ethos of the unit. The pressures against ‘faking’ also came from outside the AFPU. When Grant was in France, some men of the 7th Armoured Division who had served in the Desert took him aside and warned him not to try faking when filming their unit; as they put it ‘we’ve been told that you are frontline cameramen, ok you come alongside us and prove it!’

For Sergeant Walter, the simulated battle conditions under which he had trained at Pinewood, bore little relation to the realities of trying to film the real battle he encountered in Normandy:

In fact, when we got into the real battle conditions you found that it was almost impossible to shoot battle. Battle is two sides involved normally. And you think in terms of one man shooting one way and another shooting the other way. How can you photograph that? It’s impossible. What you can shoot is the build-up to the battle, the troops advancing into battle, the artillery firing to support them or tanks moving up at dusk or dawn or things like that. That’s all wonderful stuff to photograph. But that really isn’t battle, it’s only part of battle.

**Behaviour of soldiers**

The most intriguing difference between the AFPU film of the Normandy campaign and that of Saving Private Ryan, and indeed a characteristic that distinguishes combat film from any feature film, is the behaviour of the men towards the camera. Men cannot help looking at the camera, whereas actors make every effort to appear unaware of its presence. Even though before D-Day the cameramen had specifically instructed the soldiers to ignore the camera, they could not help glancing and smiling at the lens. Sergeant O’Neill, found this quite a problem: ‘And of course all the soldiers wanted to be photographed. They were the biggest camera hogs ever!’ Unless, however, they were very preoccupied or in extreme situations; and men who are wounded or exhausted and traumatised by combat are usually oblivious of the camera. On such occasions, soldiers can even be hostile to cameramen. Sergeants Walter and Peter Handford came across a group of soldiers in a front-line position who had been under fire for some time and they got very angry at the prospect of being filmed and photographed.

O’Neill explained their generally sympathetic attitude to the camera in these terms:
Oh they liked it. First of all they’d never seen one before. Secondly, it was a great divertissement [sic], you know, the Mrs is going to see me back in Wigan, all this kind of thing. Oh no, I think it was a welcome diversion. Indeed we found it with all the units we went to.  

Being filmed was valued by men as a chance for their loved ones to see them after a long separation. Furthermore, as author Geoff Dyer perceptively observed in relation to the First World War, for most young men war is the climactic moment of their life: ‘This was the event when history could happen to you’. This may offer another explanation for soldier’s obsession with the lens: men stare at the camera in order to ensure that they have secured a place for themselves in the historical record. A film or photographic record of their presence on the battlefield assures them status in their life after military service and into the future.

**Heroic stances**

The men in the Normandy invasion were participating in an event of international importance. Perhaps it was for this reason that the commandos and other soldiers adopted such brave, set expressions, when being filmed in the landing craft crossing the Channel. They look tough, even nonchalant as they approach the beaches. They are clearly aware of the camera, but for once they pretend not to notice it and strike a powerful pose of confident aggression. Their demeanour made a great impression on Sergeant Grant, helping to reassure him, but he was also aware of the dramatic power of their performance. When commenting on the scenes he filmed on his landing craft on the afternoon of 5 June he reflected that:

> Everybody was a natural actor. As all the men on board were my fellow Commandos from the camp at Southampton, they knew me, and they had been told to ignore the camera as much as possible. They were just natural actors, they were acting out their own private thoughts or private hells or whatever was going on in their minds.

Some soldiers on Grant’s boat may have looked nervous, but not the men who fell under the gaze of his camera as the landing craft approached the beaches. Although such an attitude no doubt helped the men to prepare themselves for battle and was an important component of the commandos’ esprit de corps, the presence of the camera has prompted a dramatic performance from the men. This is in striking contrast to the same scenes in the assault craft in Saving Private Ryan, where most of the men look extremely nervous and a couple of them actually vomit. It is hard to believe that a real soldier would allow himself to be filmed ‘throwing up’. Not only does this observation raise questions about the role or status of the camera in Saving Private Ryan, to which I will return later, but it also raises a question about acting and performance. If real soldiers act in front of the camera, how should actors portray reality?

**What does the Unedited AFPU footage bring to our understanding of war?**

Combat film is a visual document that gives the viewer a powerful sense of immediacy and connection to the past. Since the release of Battle of the Somme (1916), actuality films of war have had a thrilling, moving and occasionally traumatic impact on audiences, akin to the experience of reading the diary of a soldier. Some even suggest that actuality film is more valuable to the historian than first-hand written accounts because it is an un-mediated view of the past.

The respect and awe which many people accord to AFPU film, even during the frequent uneventful passages between action, arises because the viewer knows that he/she is watching real soldiers, men who were under threat and with whom the
The viewer may even have a personal connection. This characteristic of combat film stimulates our imagination and helps us to empathise with the men at Normandy and make sense of the abstract historical details of the battle, notably the casualty figures.

In dramatised ‘war films’ the audience spends time with the characters and watches their lives develop, but along lines prescribed by the filmmakers. By contrast, in actuality we only meet individuals fleetingly. This prompts important and disturbing questions: ‘What did this man do before the war? How was he feeling when the film was being shot? What happened to this man?’

Because of the power and influence of feature films, audiences have become used to, and come to expect, images of war with high production values. As well as the image quality itself, the battlefield in feature films has a composition and artistic quality which is theatrical and intrinsically pleasing – the filmmakers have an unconscious desire to ‘dress the set’. We are even aware of this tendency in Saving Private Ryan, where the filmmakers made a conscious effort not to glamourise war. The battle ‘fields’ have the appearance of a well-arranged exhibition case or stage set: they are coherent and visually attractive. The artificial look of the sets is particularly striking when compared to the mess of the Normandy beaches in the AFPU film, which one observer has aptly described as sometimes having ‘all the appearance of a poorly organised and fairly dull beach party’.

The tendency of feature films to aestheticise the battlefield has made it difficult for civilian audiences to grasp the ugliness and brutality of combat. The AFPU combat film provides a welcome antidote revealing as it does a chaotic, unpalatable reality, and thus offering more truthful and instructive understanding of war.

Combat film is often shot in haste and exposed in an uncontrolled environment, which means that errors can occur and, on occasion, important historical episodes have gone unrecorded. However, these mistakes do occasionally impart a powerful feeling of verisimilitude to the images. For example two of the rolls shot by Sergeant O’Neill at Sword beach were filmed with incorrect aperture, are out of focus and at odd angles. For one Imperial War Museum cataloguer they succeeded because of these problems, bringing an ‘excellent impressionistic record of the atmosphere of organised chaos which was a feature of the invasion beaches’.

In Saving Private Ryan the camera alternates between viewing the world from the ‘point of view’ of an American soldier to that of the audience. The unedited AFPU combat film on the other hand, always operates from the participant’s ‘point of view’: the audience is effectively trapped in the perspective of the cameraman. Any violent or powerful events for which the cameraman is unprepared, or cannot control, are instantly shared by the audience. In the AFPU footage, the most obvious example of this being the violent jolt of the image as O’Neill is shot in the arm and the film ends. By contrast the perfectly composed view of the feature film seems occasionally to be like looking through double-glazing at a storm: it is dramatic but unthreatening. Our sense of presence on the battlefield is reinforced by the soldiers’ response to the camera, as he engages with us via the lens, smiling and inviting us to join him. This can be enjoyable but it can also be disconcerting, as the AFPU film exposes the audience to the horrors and indignities of war. A feature film allows an audience to indulge in the horrors and excitement of war voyeuristically. Not so with the AFPU film, where the soldier knows that we are watching: and the audience knows the soldier is aware of being watched.

Feature films give the impression that soldiers are constantly in combat. In fact this is far from the case, as the AFPU film accurately reflects, recording exhaustively all the aspects of a soldier’s experience of war: eating, marching, washing, building fortifications, digging trenches, fixing and cleaning weapons and endless periods of waiting. The official film reminds us that much of soldiering is just hard physical labour. The AFPU film in particular is egalitarian: not...
only does it look at all aspects of a front-line soldier’s experience, but at the contribution of the support units who supply, feed, provide communications and even entertain the front-line soldier. It is also invaluable to the historian as it provides a visual glossary of equipment and activities on the battlefield.

Military historians and filmmakers describe battles with hindsight and tend to present them from the perspective of the generals. The AFPU film shares the limited horizon and localised view of the battle experienced by the ordinary soldier. Not only a low horizon topographically, in terms of hedgerow, slit trench and forest, but in terms of the perspective of the battle. Combat film contains none of the great strategic sweeps and grand views of the feature film that help the audience to understand the battle as a whole. Similarly, AFPU combat footage generally moves at the pace of the foot soldier.

Perhaps the best tribute one can give to the work of the AFPU cameramen is that Second World War veterans who visit the Museum become utterly absorbed by the combat film and are struck by its authenticity and the faithful record it provides of their experience.

But is the AFPU footage a more truthful account than Spielberg’s version of the Normandy landings?

Audio

The AFPU cameramen were struck by the terrific noise that built into a crescendo as they hit the beaches on D-Day. There was the naval bombardment from the Allied fleet and the returning fire from the German defences. Grant even heard Colonel Lovat’s personal piper, Bill Millin, playing his bagpipes. Sound not only creates atmosphere, but it also picks out the action and makes sense of the details on a film. For example, on close examination of O’Neill’s film, sniper shells can be seen kicking up the sand on the beach around the feet of the advancing soldiers; similarly in Greenhalgh’s reels, a mortar shell explodes in the background. Sound is part of the language that enables an audience to make sense of actualité filming, particularly in such an alien world as the beaches on D-Day. Because their movement was restricted and they did not possess zoom lenses, it was difficult for cameramen to direct the attention of the viewer to any detail of the scene they were filming. Sergeant William Lawrie of the AFPU, who was not at D-Day but filmed later in Normandy, described how difficult it could be to convey the true nature of a battle situation:

Troops crossing the river in an evening dusk situation, on the screen must have looked exactly as if they have been going out for a picnic, but it wasn’t a picnic. You couldn’t, in a silent, black and white film, you don’t see or hear the bullets, you don’t get the atmosphere, it was just some troops stepping into a boat and pushing across the river.61

Similarly Dope Sheets, oral transcripts and other documents are often needed to make sense of the story provided by AFPU film. Ryan does this for us with the script and sound effects.

Dead and wounded

In contrast with Saving Private Ryan, in British combat film there is an absence of dead and seriously wounded. In the AFPU film we are shown the ‘walking wounded’, men bearing ‘cosmetic’ arm and head bandages, or on stretchers, conscious with their thumbs up and grinning at the camera. But there are very few views of the dead and none of the Allied dead. In interviews with the cameramen they have been adamant that they were not given rules on this. Colonel Stewart, who was in command of No.5 Section in Normandy and set up the training course at Pinewood, denies issuing guidelines or rules on the filming of the dead and wounded. This practice arose from a combination of self-censorship and a practical approach to filming.

AFPU cameramen saw plenty of Allied dead...
When Sergeant O’Neill came across dead British soldiers in the sand hills at the top of the beach, he instinctively made the same decision: ‘No, no, because I suppose the old instincts came back. You photograph material which could be used, and they would not use pictures of dead bodies. Used pictures of dead Germans but not pictures of dead British’.62 The cameramen practised this self-censorship throughout their service with the AFPU. Richard Leatherbarrow’s recollection of his experience of coming across dead Canadians at Juno is informative:

... to see a body, a most bizarre, gruesome form that I ever saw at any part of the war, with the head blown off in a sitting up position with the movements of the arms still taking place. Now if I could have stopped...all of us we were making a dash to get under some sort of cover, that was something I just couldn’t stop to film, ... I couldn’t see the purpose of it ... goodness me I filmed enough dead, mainly Germans and civilians after that, but that one isolated instance was something that ... if I had all the time in the world to film it, I would have rejected it because the whole thing was beyond. Well who would have wanted that for photographic records and what purpose would it have served? ... what would have been the real justification – except for the voyeur type. It could not have gone on a newsreel.63

This self-censorship of the AFPU cameramen was as much to do with their status as Army cameramen as to do with their awareness of official attitudes to the portrayal of British losses on screen. They were not professional journalists or neutral observers; they had been serving soldiers before being transferred to the AFPU and it upset them to see dead comrades. Sergeant Laws: ‘As we started to go inland, then I came across dead British soldiers and that made you think, and then when you came across a dead German soldier it lifted you up, it gave you a real fillip. You were pleased to see it.’64 As a consequence of this policy, dead British or Allied US servicemen only appear by chance or very fleetingly in AFPU film of the Normandy campaign. Intriguingly, although he did not remember it, Leatherbarrow did film the dead Canadians on the beach at Juno and he recorded it in his dope sheet. The corpse of a soldier of the North Shore Regiment appears in...
mid-shot in the foreground of a 25ft pan from the shore to the seawall which Leatherbarrow was sheltering behind. Leatherbarrow does not dwell on the body, and the framing and distance from the subject mean that the man is not identifiable and could easily be lost among the rest of the debris. Nonetheless, this is an important and rare example of a tradition since the First World War of combat cameramen filming scenes for historical record that gave an indication of the horrors of war. A practise they have carried out despite, or perhaps because of, the official attitude of the British military and propaganda authorities.

This partly explains Sergeant Walter’s decision early in his campaign, to film a scene of two dead German soldiers by a pillbox. Superstition also played a role:

... something happened shortly after the landing on the beach which ...I don’t think very many people have admitted it, certainly not in my presence ... one became used to seeing violent death, bloody bodies ... And whereas one [had] reacted with horror, very shortly I personally wanted to get close with my close lens and photograph every little detail of that dead body or bodies. And it became a sort of defence mechanism in a way ... I thought that by some miracle if I photographed that and sent that back to England, maybe it wouldn’t happen to me.

Cameramen also covered such scenes out of a sense of obligation to the soldiers they were with as Walter recalls: ‘I knew that it would be shown at least once. And that would be at rushes viewing somewhere in London or in England. And I thought somebody’s going to see it and they are going to see what we are seeing. And I wanted somebody to share that with me’. Sergeant Laws filmed a gruesome sequence of a charred German corpse at the wheel of a half-track for exactly the same purpose:

This was a deliberate attempt to shock people, or people at Pinewood, as to actual horrors of war. I shot this general scene of the German burnt, then I shot this close up of the individual rightup, full-face. I didn’t think it would hurt people sitting in their comfortable armchairs at Pinewood to see what some of the horrors were.

But Laws was careful to take in to account the British sensibilities about the depiction of corpses, and shot the sequence so that there was plenty of choice for the newsreel editors.

The coverage in British newsreels and official films of the destruction of the German 7th Army is a good example of the restraint shown towards the depiction of the horrors of war. In addition to George Laws’ film of the burnt out half-track, there are three reels covering the wreckage of the 7th Army, shot by RAF cameramen driving through the roads in Falaise. Included among the views of burnt and wrecked tanks, trucks and other vehicles were some gruesome close-ups of dead horses and the maggot-infested corpses of German soldiers. The newsreels covering this important allied victory – those for consumption by the general public – just showed the vehicles and prisoners, while the issue of the Gen newsreel, for screening to RAF personnel included the more respectful mid-shots of the corpses without the close-ups of the putrefaction.

In America attitudes were different. US combat cameramen, once they were given access to the battlefield, did not feel constrained about filming their own dead. For example, scenes of dead American soldiers appear in the Battle of San Pietro, With the Marines at Tarawa and film taken of the fighting at Iwo Jima and Pelilieu. This is not to say that US military and civilian authorities did not exercise control over what was seen by the public. For example they cut some of the more graphic scenes from The Battle of San Pietro and insisted that dead American soldiers were only shown from the rear so they could not be identified. This film was not released until near the end of the war so that it would not have a detrimental affect on recruiting or public morale. But in contrast to Britain, the US government took a more robust attitude to the sensibilities of the American public and were willing to let comparatively explicit evidence of US fatalities be shown on the cinema screens. For example, one of the newsreel issues covering D-Day that was distributed to cinemas in the USA included a sequence of a man in his death throes.

Conclusion

During the Omaha beach scenes in Saving Private Ryan the camera assumes on a number of different roles: firstly, it is the ‘point of view’ (the US Rangers and the defenders); secondly, it is the ‘all seeing eye’; thirdly, it views the beach scenes through the eyes of Captain Miller (Tom Hanks); and lastly
through those of an anonymous Ranger, who runs up the beach after Miller, audibly panting and groaning. This is perplexing: if Spielberg was simply striving to mimic combat film, he has failed. Even if we compare these scenes with the film shot by the Marine Corps on Tarawa or Peleliu, which provide the most encompassing views of combat, only a suicidal cameraman flying around the battlefield in an armoured micro-light could have covered the battle at Omaha as comprehensively as Spielberg’s camera-team. And in comparison with the highly constrained views of the AFPU men at Normandy, there is no similarity. But the camera technique adopted for the Omaha scenes is also inconsistent with the assumptions of conventional cinema: logically if the lens is the audience’s omnipresent eye, it should be unaffected by the battle and certainly not become smeared with ‘blood’ and water.

It may seem unfair to apply such rigid cinematic theory to the film. However, in doing so we have highlighted the artificial and manipulative filmmaking technique with which the battle has been recreated. For all the hype about realism and authenticity, Spielberg has done no more than borrow some stylistic elements characteristic of combat filming to enhance the dramatic power of the scenes. Close examination of the Omaha scenes in comparison with a consistent ‘point of view’ perspective (i.e. that of the AFPU cameramen) shows that Spielberg’s visual representation of the battle is conventional.

It would be wrong to be too critical of Steven Spielberg, because of the laudable intentions that motivated him during the making of the film which were to encourage more respect for the men who fought in Normandy. In order to do this, he had to find a cinematic method that would ‘build kinship’ between the audience and the men who fought at Omaha. He has been successful in this regard, and it was reported that following the release of the film the number of people visiting the American cemetery at St. Laurent to pay their respects rose significantly. Moreover, by marshalling such a powerful sound track, along with his unswerving determination not to shy away from the horrors of war, he has come close to representing the truth and ugliness of war, as so many veterans have attested.

At the start of this essay, I argue that all the filmmaking techniques (including mimicking combat film) adopted by Spielberg to recreate a truthful account of the fighting at Omaha, had been used before. The honourable aims which led Spielberg to try to create such a realistic vision of war were shared with his predecessors. The only slight difference being that he was trying to honour his father’s generation, while the commitment to realism of previous filmmakers of this genre stemmed from having fought in the war themselves and having lost so many close friends. Their sense of obligation to the memory of these men has led filmmakers of the genre to pursue the ‘truthful’ picture of war by expending great resources and utilizing the latest cinematic techniques to replicate the battlefield. As Neil Ascherson points out, it is debatable whether this obsession with realism – what he terms ‘sheer massed authenticity’ – has brought us closer to the ‘truth of war’ than have the efforts of artists who have explored more abstract and satirical methods. However, this preoccupation with realism has undoubtedly helped to ensure commercial and critical success, as each generation of audiences and reviewers have greeted battle recreations in the latest war film with enthusiasm, claiming that unprecedented levels of realism have been achieved. From this we conclude that although Saving Private Ryan may seem, from our perspective, to be groundbreaking, it is likely that future filmmakers will produce films about war that make Spielberg’s efforts seem artificial and clichéd. Moreover, these new treatments, even when undertaken by directors working in the tradition of Milestone, Renoir and Spielberg, will never attain the truth about war recorded in the rolls of film shot by the sergeant cameramen of the AFPU. A perspective whose very limitations are so revealing of the dangers of battle, and which document so eloquently the laborious, unglamorous and nasty war of the soldier.

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Appendix: Biographies of the AFPU cameramen

Sergeant Desmond O'Neill was from Manchester. His father was an optician. O'Neill was interested in photography and at the age of 8 took a photograph of Fenians marching in the city. At 14 he joined the Daily Express in Manchester as a messenger for the photo department. He later worked as a messenger with Fox photos. He was called up at 18 and joined the Lancashire Fusiliers, where he served until May 1943 when he transferred to the AFPU. At the end of his training at Pinewood he was sent for infantry training with the Irish Guards. As one of the youngest in the Unit and fit, he was asked to volunteer to film the first wave at D-Day. After the war he worked in the photographic section of Soldier magazine and then became a freelancer working for Harpers and Queen, Tatler and Vogue.

Sergeant William A. Greenhalgh had been a foreman baker in Blackburn, Lancashire before the war. He was wounded shortly after landing at the Queen Red sector of Sword beach. But he managed to film four minutes of excellent footage before being concussed by a piece of shrapnel from a mortar shell. As a result of his wound he was sent back to England and after medical treatment to Pinewood, where he worked with the AFPU until the end of the war.

Sergeant Ian Grant was a Scot who served with the Royal Scots and saw action at Dunkirk before he joined the AFPU. His father had been a reconnaissance photographer with the RFC during the First World War and set up a professional studio after the war, where Ian Grant worked when he left school. However, Grant wanted to be a cine cameraman. After the war he worked as a cameraman on the Rank This Modern Age documentary series and then for Granada TV. Ian Grant’s published account of his career with the AFPU is Cameramen At War (Cambridge: Patrick Stephens, 1980).

Sergeant Norman Clague filmed at D-Day, where he was attached to the No.1 Special Service Commandos, landing on the Sword beaches near Ouistreham. He was killed on a night assault on 12/13 June at Bréville and was the first death of No. 5 Company of the AFPU. Unfortunately we know little more about Norman Clague.

Sergeant George Laws had been a photo engraver and amateur sports photographer before the War, with a special interest in motorcycle racing. When the war started he joined the Royal Corps of Signals as a motorcycle dispatch rider. In March 1943 he applied to join the AFPU. After D-Day Laws was attached to the Armoured Division, filming the tank battle operation ‘Goodwood’ and the upsetting scenes of French women having their heads shaved for ‘horizontal collaboration’. Later he filmed the liberation of Antwerp and Operation Market Garden and in Berlin at the end of the war. He was awarded a British Empire Medal for his camerawork with the AFPU. Despite this commendation, he decided not to go into professional cinematography as he had recently married and did not want to spend long periods away from home. He returned to his previous career as a photo engraver, working at the Mirror until he retired in 1981.

Sergeant Richard Leatherbarrow was an apprentice portrait photographer before the war and served with the territorials in the Duke of Wellington’s regiment, which became the Tank Delivery Squadron of the Royal Armoured Corps at the start of the war. He joined the AFPU in the summer of 1943. After D-Day and Normandy he spent a day or so at Bergen-Belsen, where he joined the cameramen covering the work of the British Army to help the surviving inmates of the camp. He also filmed the ceremony at Lüneburg Heath where the German high command surrendered to Montgomery. After the war he worked in the feature film industry.

Sergeant Ernest Walter was from Barry, South Glamorgan and his father was a shipwright. His father encouraged him to go into accountancy at the age of 14. Walter was called up in 1939 when he was twenty and joined the Welsh Regiment. His father had been a good amateur photographer, and Walter wanted to be an aerial photographer. He later transferred to the AFPU. After the war Walter became a feature film editor and ended up teaching editing at the National Film School.

Notes

1. During a trailer for a programme about the film (War Stories. Mark Cousins Talks to Steven Spielberg), the BBC television continuity announcer said: ‘There was a time when we could only imagine war. In Saving Private Ryan Steven Spielberg recreates history’. BBC1, 7 September 1998.
2. The formidable German defences at Omaha comprised '8 concrete bunkers with guns of 75mm or larger calibre; 35 pillboxes with artillery pieces of various sizes and/or automatic weapons; four batteries of artillery; 18 anti-tank guns; six mortar pits; 35 rocket-launching sites, each with 4x38mm rocket tubes; and no less than 85 machine gun posts'. Quoted in Cornelius Ryan, The Longest Day: June 6, 1944 (London: Gollancz, 1961).

3. Between the landings of the first wave of American soldiers at 6.30am and nightfall on 6 June, 34,250 troops had landed at Omaha Beach at a cost of 4,649 casualties, of which 3,000 were killed. On Sword beach 28,845 men were landed at Gold 24,970 and Juno 21,400. The cost in casualties on these beaches was undoubtedly lighter, approximately 3,000 in total.

4. The first illustrated lecture 'D-Day Filming - For Real', was held in the cinema of the Imperial War Museum on the 6 June 2001. I am particularly grateful on both occasions to the projectionists who helped me to prepare and screen these complicated programmes of film.

5. American combat cameramen mainly used the Bell and Howell 35mm Eyemo, a camera with three turret lenses designed to be hand-held. The British designed 'Vinten Normandy', was supposed to be modelled on the Eyemo, but was inferior in most respects as was the American made De Vry camera, most widely used by British cameramen. However, the features and design of the staple British and American combat cameras were the same: 35mm, loaded with a loose spool, clock-work driven and carrying the same amount of film (100 feet). In addition to the Eyemo, American cameramen also used a magazine loaded Kodak Cine-Special and the Bell and Howell 16mm Filmo, but not at Normandy.

6. My thanks to Jerome Kuehl and Thomas Doherty for this information.

7. This training was apparently similar to the kind that would have been experienced by US soldiers during the war, and was supervised by the US Marine Corps veteran Captain Dale Dyer. Publicity notes for Saving Private Ryan (London: UIP, Paramount, 1998), pp. 7-8.

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10. Steven Spielberg discussing the film while on the set in a programme called Return to Normandy, broadcast on BBC1 on 7 September 1998.


12. Nick Hopkins, 'Wrong number lands navy expert in Spielberg's war'. In this article Hopkins quotes Sgt. Major Ken Murgatroyd, a Royal Marines veteran who helped recreate the beach scenes: 'The lads who fought in the Falklands war said the filming brought back Bomb Alley'. Guardian, 6 August 1998, p. 5.


16. Much of the escalating budget of All Quiet on the Western Front (1930), can be attributed to Milestone’s desire for realism, which led him to reconstruct a First World War battlefield in California and purchase large numbers of original uniforms from Europe, as well as armories of surplus military equipment, rifles, machine guns and even artillery pieces. See Andrew Kelly, Cinema and the Great War (London: Routledge, 1997), 45. See also John Whiteclay Chambers, ‘All Quiet on the Western Front: The anti-war film and the image of Modern War’, in Whiteclay Chambers and
Anthony Asquith’s film *Tell England* (1930), about the campaign at Gallipoli, although not on the scale of *The Big Parade* or *All Quiet on the Western Front*, had remarkably realistic trench scenes for the time and received assistance from the Admiralty in the form of the loan of ships and extras which helped to create realism.

Abel Gance’s film *J’Accuse* (1919), included 2,000 French soldiers, who were provided by the army during a period of leave from the fighting at Verdun. During the production of *The Big Parade* (1925), King Vidor was advised by veterans who had served with the US Expeditionary Force in France as well as being lent 4,000 soldiers and 200 trucks by the US Army for the battle scenes. When making *La Grande Illusion* (1938), Jean Renoir was assisted by a number of veterans of the First World War. A number of members of the production team on *Tell England* also had direct experience of the First World War, including the dialogue writer A.P. Herbert, who had fought at Gallipoli.

In order to achieve historical accuracy and authenticity and to help him rehearse the army of real soldiers he had at his disposal, Zanuck called on the expertise of thirty-seven high-ranking veterans of the German and Allied forces to advise him on the battle in Normandy. As part of his strategy to achieve authenticity, all the actors were required to speak in the original languages of the combatants. He even went as far as to arrange for a Horsa glider to be built from the original designs, for the scenes of the attack by British parachutists on Pegasus Bridge. Stephen Ambrose, ‘The Longest Day’ (US, 1962) ‘Blockbuster History’, in John Whiteclay Chambers II and David Culbert (eds.) *World War II, in Film, and History* (New York: OUP, 1996), 99–103.

Location filming for *Tehirs is the Glory* began in Arnhem in August 1945, approximately a year after the real battle had begun on 17 September 1944. As an indication of how little the landscape had changed since the battle itself, the parachutists performing in the film had to clear some of the locations of mines before filming could begin. The site was still so undisturbed, that the Graves Registration Unit had only just begun removing bodies from the battlefield graves and transferring them to the Airborne cemetery at Oosterbeek. See Trevor Pople, viewing notes for *Tehirs is the Glory* (London: After the Battle, 1987).

The camera work in the Gallipoli landing scene in *Tell England* (1931) contains a number of sequences simulating cinema-verite, including a striking ‘hand-held’ point of view sequence on the beach which seems to anticipate the Omaha beach scene from *Saving Private Ryan*. When Stuart Cooper was making *Overlord* (1974) about D-Day from the British perspective, he worked closely with the Imperial War Museum to try to recreate the combat film shot by AFPU cameraman. In fact many of Spielberg’s predecessors in this field, notably Milestone and Zukor, had been very familiar with this genre as their own war service had been as cameramen, editors or producers with official military film agencies.

Steven Spielberg during an interview with Mark Cousins on a BBC2 programme entitled *War Stories*. *Mark Cousins Talks to Steven Spielberg*, broadcast on 13 September 1998.

*The Battle of San Pietro* (1945), IWM film catalogue no. MGH 3664.

Steven Spielberg discussing the film while on the set in a television programme entitled *Return to Normandy*, broadcast on BBC1 on 7 September 1998.

Steven Spielberg during an interview with Mark Cousins, in the programme entitled *War Stories*. *Mark Cousins Talks to Steven Spielberg*, broadcast on BBC on 13 September 1998.


I plan to return to this topic in another essay, which will concentrate on the differences between American and British combat filming during the Second World War.

The shots of these out-takes are reproduced in Volume III, Part 2, of David Culbert (ed.) *Film and propaganda in America: A documentary history* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990: e.g. Document 82 ADC 906 February 1944, Captain John Huston’s Team, coverage: Re-enacted footage. V.S. troops fire rifles from behind rock. Troops move across field towards farmhouse; two men fall as if hit. L.S. American soldiers move up mountainside as white phosphorous shells explode near them.

In filming these remarkable scenes at Tarawa the US Marine cameramen put themselves in great danger (two were killed and one was wounded), however the filming was not as suicidal as it may seem. Firstly, the fighting on Tarawa lent itself to combat filming as the action took place over a highly compressed area. Secondly, the cameraman’s depth of field was greater than normal on a battlefield because the Japanese defenders had cut the undergrowth back on the beaches. One should also stress that the majority of the filming suggests the cameramen took all the normal precautions that one would expect of men filming under fire: they keep very low out of the line of fire and remain a safe distance behind the advancing soldiers. The scenes in which the viewer is shown simultaneously the Marines firing their rifles and flamethrowers and the target of their firing (bunkers, dugouts, trees, etc.), were filmed when the Japanese defenders were sheltering in underground tunnels and by firing at an undisturbed, that the Graves Registration Unit had only just begun removing bodies from the battlefield graves and transferring them to the Airborne cemetery at Oosterbeek. See Trevor Pople, viewing notes for *Tehirs is the Glory* (London: After the Battle, 1987).

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32. Out of 106 pictures shot by Capa at the 'Easy Red' section of Omaha beach, only eight were salvaged. Apparently the excited darkroom assistant had turned the heat on too much when drying the negatives and the emulsions had melted. Robert Capa, Slightly Out of Focus (New York: Henry Holt, 1947), 151.

33. Sergeant Ian A. Grant, AFPU cameraman, in a recorded interview held in the Imperial War Museum's Sound Archive, accession no. 3865/19, reel 10.

34. The capacity of the De Vry was 100 feet of film, which runs for approximately one minute and seven seconds. One winding of the clockwork mechanism would advance the film 40–55 feet. The Vinten Normandy could take 200 foot spools. The film was Kodak Pan X film, and the exposure was very slow.

35. Coverage of the commandos' sports day in Swaythling on 29 May 1944, can be found in the IWM Film Archive (reel no. A70 21), filmed by sergeants Walter and Leatherbarrow. Scenes of the 1st battalion South Lancashire regiment receiving French money and examining a model and pictures of the Normandy beaches are on the same reel and were shot by Sergeant O'Neill.

36. Sergeant Ian A. Grant, AFPU cameraman, in a recorded interview in the Imperial War Museum's Sound Archive, accession no. 3865/19, reel 10.

37. Imperial War Museum film catalogue number A70 29-30, (Rolls 1–2).

38. Imperial War Museum film catalogue number A70 31-32 (Roll 2).

39. Imperial War Museum film catalogue number A70 31-32 (Roll 3).

40. Herbert James Peach served with the Royal Navy during the Second World War and was a coxswain with the Combined Forces during the D-Day Landings. Mr. Peach carried Canadian soldiers in his landing craft and put them ashore at St. Aubin on Juno beach. As well as steering the craft to shore, he was responsible for turning on the automatic camera via a small button at his side. The sequence taken in his craft appears in the film The True Glory (1945). We are grateful to the late Mr. Peach and his son Philip Peach, for writing to the Museum with this information.

41. Colonel Hugh Stewart explained in a recorded interview 'Arrangements were made that half a dozen cameras would be mounted in the aft end of a landing craft' as it was realised that a steady camera shot could not have been taken with 'an ordinary handheld camera' with the ramp going down and all the soldiers jumping out. Lieutenant Colonel Hugh Stewart, MBE, Imperial War Museum’s Sound Archive, accession no. 4579/06, reel 3. We do not know if Herbert Peach's landing craft was one of the boats cited by Colonel Stewart. However, most of the automatic cameras did not produce film, probably because the coxswains forgot to turn on the cameras as they were so preoccupied with ensuring that their men were landed safely.


43. Other official US films released in colour are At the Front in North Africa (1943), produced by the US Army Signal Corps and supervised and partly shot by Darryl F. Zanuck; The Memphis Belle (1944) and most of the films of the Pacific campaign.

43a Sergeant George Laws, AFPU cameraman in a recorded interview held in the Imperial War Museum's Sound Archive, accession no. 14839/13, reel 3.

44. Sergeant Ernest Walter, AFPU cameraman in a recorded interview held in the Imperial War Museum’s Sound Archive, accession no. 8299/07, reel 3.

45. There are many other examples, such as the moment when the ramp drops on the landing craft and the camera takes the position in the fire of a machine gun.

46. Sergeant W. Greenhalgh's otherwise excellent coverage of the landings on Sword beach was marred in a couple of rolls by an unidentified blur which appeared at the bottom of each frame, possibly caused by an obstruction in the lens. See Imperial War Museum film catalogue no. A70 36-1.

47. Sergeant Ian A. Grant, AFPU cameraman, in a recorded interview held in the Imperial War Museum's Sound Archive, accession no. 3865/19, reel 10.

48. Sergeant Ernest Walter, AFPU cameraman, in a recorded interview held in the Imperial War Museum’s Sound Archive, accession no. 8299/07, reel 3.

49. Lt. Colonel Hugh Stewart, AFPU, in a recorded interview held in the Imperial War Museum’s Sound Archive, accession no. 4579/06: reel 1.

50. Twenty-five members of the AFPU were killed in the war. Sergeant Ian A. Grant, AFPU cameraman, in a recorded interview in the Imperial War Museum’s Sound Archive, accession no. 3865/19, reel 6.

51. Sergeant Palmer's Dope Sheet A700113/1, 4 August 1944. Showing various shots of the 15th Scottish Division East of Beny-Bocage.

52. Sergeant Ian Grant, AFPU cameraman, in a recorded interview in the Imperial War Museum’s Sound Archive, accession no. 3865/19, reel 6.

53. Sergeant Ernest Walter, AFPU cameraman, in a recorded interview held in the Imperial War Mu-
54. Sergeant Desmond O’Neill, AFPU cameraman, in a recorded interview held in the Imperial War Museum’s Sound Archive, accession no. 8299/07, reel 6.

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56. Sergeant Desmond O’Neill, AFPU cameraman, in a recorded interview held in the Imperial War Museum’s Sound Archive, accession no. 3971/04, reel 2.


58. Sergeant Ian A. Grant, AFPU cameraman, in a recorded interview in the Imperial War Museum’s Sound Archive, accession no. 3865/19, reel 10.


61. Sergeant William Lawrie, AFPU cameraman, in a recorded interview in the Imperial War Museum’s Sound Archive, accession no. 7481/03, reel 1.

62. Sergeant Desmond O’Neill, AFPU cameraman, in a recorded interview held in the Imperial War Museum’s Sound Archive, accession no. 3971/04, reel 3.

63. Sergeant Richard Leatherbarrow, AFPU cameraman, in a recorded interview held in the Imperial War Museum’s Sound Archive, accession No. 8253/3, reel 1.

64. Sergeant George Laws, AFPU cameraman, in a recorded interview held in the Imperial War Museum’s Sound Archive, accession no. 14839/13, reel 5.


66. Sergeant Ernest Walter, AFPU cameraman, in a recorded interview held in the Imperial War Museum’s Sound Archive, accession no. 8299/07, reel 7.

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68. Sergeant George Laws, AFPU cameraman, in a recorded interview held in the Imperial War Museum’s Sound Archive, accession no. 14839/13, reel 5.


70. War Pictorial News No. 174 (4 September 1944) Imperial War Museum catalogue no. WPW 174, and the Gen No. 9-The Voice of the Service. ‘Gen Special’ –RAF Warfront: The Battle of Normandy (September 1944) Imperial War Museum catalogue no. GEN 9; Movietone News ‘Allies apply squeeze to the Falaise Gap’ (17 August 1944), Imperial War Museum film catalogue no. NMV 793A. This footage was also not used in an item on the destruction of the German 7th Army at Falaise in British Movietone News No. 795, released on 28 August 1944. Imperial War Museum catalogue number NMV 795.


73. A soldier on the beach is shot, struggles to get up again and finally falls back into the sea. This sequence is described in Thomas Doherty, Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1993), 244.


75. Critics widely commended All Quiet on the Western Front for its realism. Sydney Carroll in the Sunday Times said ‘Realism reaches its zenith in this picture. It made me shudder with horror. It brought the war back to me as nothing has ever done before since 1918’. Quoted in Andrew Kelly, Cinema and the Great War (London: Routledge, 1997), 50. The Big Parade also received praise for the realism of its battle scenes; in Life Robert Sherwood called it ‘spectacular, harsh, raw-meaty … I could not detect a single flaw … nor one error of taste or authenticity’, also quoted in Andrew Kelly, p. 35. The Longest Day had mixed reviews, but at least one reviewer was struck by its ‘documentary’ style. See Stephen E. Ambrose, ‘The Longest Day: Blockbuster History’, in Whitelaw and Chambers (eds.) World War II, Film, and History (New York: OUP, 1996), 104.