

# The Spartan Sentinel

*...inspiring and equipping...*

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Team,

Good morning! From time to time a movie comes along that seems to have a noticeable impact on our culture, or at least a part of our culture. Sometimes they address a social issue and generate meaningful discussion about it, or they highlight an aspect of our history that causes a deeper appreciation for those who were a part of it, or they provide a stunning analogy that teaches an important lesson or truth for those who watch it.

It would be interesting to ask each of you what movies you would classify as “life-changing” or “epic.” After watching *Dumb and Dumber* again over Christmas Break, I may have to put that one in there...JUST KIDDING! There was a movie that debuted in 1998 that would fall into my “life-changing” movie category, and that movie is *Saving Private Ryan*. *Saving Private Ryan* is an incredible movie, in my opinion, for many reasons. Granted, it is very tough to watch, but the plot is interesting. There’s a moving lesson to the story as Private Ryan is exhorted to “earn this,” the sacrifice of many for his life. It’s hard not to be brought to tears at the end when Private Ryan, now an old man, is recalling the events of his rescue and begs his wife to tell him he’s led a good life. However, probably what I appreciate most about the movie is the interactions of the squad of Army Rangers charged with saving Private Ryan.

As you know, I’m almost obsessed with “effective teams.” I love watching them interact, studying them, trying to figure out what makes them effective and applying that to my life and to our collective “life” here as a team at school. We have a lot to learn from effective teams; both from their mistakes and from their successes. Even though *Saving Private Ryan* is a fictional story, I don’t want to trivialize the sacrifices of our veterans in any way by comparing what they did with what we do here at Jefferson. However, I do believe that the interactions of, and the attitudes depicted in Captain Miller’s squad can teach us a lot.

Just in case you’ve never seen it, the basic premise of the movie is that there are four brothers all fighting for America in WWII. On D-Day, 3 of those 4 brothers are killed. When this is brought to the attention of General George Marshall, he makes the decision to pull the remaining brother, Private James Francis Ryan, from action and return him to his grieving

parents. The task of finding Private Ryan and returning him home is charged to Captain John Miller, played by Tom Hanks. Captain Miller selects a squad from what remains of his battalion after D-Day and then begins to scour the French countryside looking for Private Ryan.

The story is fascinating to me because there is an internal conflict throughout the movie with the members of the squad. They struggle with the “fairness” of returning Ryan to his parents when they themselves face the same dangers and have many brothers in arms that have lost their lives. They don’t like the “special treatment” that Private Ryan is getting. This conflict is accentuated throughout the movie as one by one members of the squad are killed by German forces as they search for Private Ryan. Additionally, they don’t see how saving Private Ryan helps them accomplish the larger goal of winning the war.

I could literally write all day about the lessons learned and the morals of the movie. Specifically, Captain Miller’s leadership of the squad is an extraordinary example of effective leadership. However, there are two scenes that really stand out to me as we think about this idea of *effective teams*.

The first scene is when the squad comes upon a German machine gun post. It’s obvious from the surroundings that the machine gun post is a danger to Allied forces. Captain Miller makes the decision to take out the machine gun post and he is opposed by most of the men in his squad. They challenge him saying that they could just quietly move around the machine gun post unnoticed and still accomplish their mission of saving Private Ryan. At one point, agitated, Captain Miller responds, “Our mission is to win the war!” and the squad successfully takes out the machine gun post, but not without another casualty. What we see in this scene is that ***effective teams have a constancy of purpose and they are clear about that purpose!***

Even though this specific group of soldiers had the specific objective of saving Private Ryan, the mission was to win the war. In war, different groups are charged with different tasks, but the mission is to always win the war. It was important for them to have that constancy of purpose and to be clear about it. Here at school, *our mission is to inspire and equip all students to continuously acquire and apply knowledge and skills while pursuing their dreams and enriching the lives of others*. That’s our mission...that’s our purpose. On a day in and day out basis you will have many other functions and jobs. It may be to teach a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade math lesson or it may be to answer telephones, or make lunch for kids, or clean the building, but regardless of our functions and jobs, our mission stays the same. ***Effective teams keep the mission always in front of them. They have a constancy of purpose.***

The second scene that stands out to me is toward the end of the movie. The squad has finally located Private Ryan and he’s in a town named Ramell. He’s with a ragtag band of soldiers guarding a bridge over a river. The bridge is important because it’s one of the few

places were heavy equipment and men could be moved over the river and it leads to Paris. So the bridge is a hot commodity for both the Axis and the Allies. Once Private Ryan is informed of the situation, he refuses to leave. He has a constancy of purpose and understands that regardless of what happened to his brothers, he needs to defend this bridge to help win the war. Of course Captain Miller's squad can't believe it and while they're frustrated with Private Ryan because they've come all that way to find him and many in their squad have died along the way, they respect him because of the courage he shows in his desire to win the war.

There's a scene where Captain Miller goes for a walk with his trusted confidant, Sergeant Mike Horvath. Captain Miller doesn't know what to do so he asks Mike. Mike's response is profound. He talks about how important the bridge is and understands that even though their job is to get Private Ryan home that maybe helping to defend this bridge would make all of the sacrifice to find Private Ryan worth it. I love this quote (I hope the language doesn't offend),

*"Well, part of me thinks the kid's right. What he's done to deserve this. He wants to stay here, fine. Let's leave him and go home. But another part of me thinks, what if by some miracle we stay, then actually make it out of here. Someday we might look back on this and decide that saving Private Ryan was the one decent thing we were able to pull out of this whole godawful, shitty mess. That's what I was thinking, sir. Like you said, Captain, we do that, we all earn the right to go home."*

What I love about this quote is that it highlights how effective teams and really effective people approach problems. *The question is how do we react when we face hardships?* This squad had been through the worst kind of hardships. Two of their men had already been killed along the way. They were tired, hungry, and sore. And when they finally find Ryan, he won't leave because he's committed to the mission and to the only brothers he has left.

This effective team had a constancy of purpose, and so they stayed to help defend the bridge, and win the war. But more than that, they *approached this hardship by finding the positives in the situation*. Rather than just giving up and leaving, they realized that if they lived through the battle to defend the bridge, they would look back on a terrible war and know that "saving Private Ryan was the one decent thing" they did during the war.

So the question becomes, *how do we react as a team when we face hardships?* When our class sizes are large how do we react? When we have parents that aren't supportive, how do we react? When we feel the stress of all that we're being asked to do, how do we react? Are we solution focused? Do we understand the "big picture" behind what we're doing? Do we have a constancy of purpose? Do we understand that enduring these hardships will literally make the future better because of what we do for our kids? I know I'm not always perfect with this and there are times when I give up, or complain, or get focused on the problem rather than finding the positive in every situation and staying solution focused.

So, my challenge for all of us as a team is to have a constancy of purpose; to always keep our mission in front of us, so that when we face problems, we can tackle them effectively. Effective teams are solution focused. They overcome the obstacles that ineffective teams stumble over. When they stumble, the students suffer and when we overcome, our students succeed. Let's keep it up!