

Organizers hold first GI Film Festival in Washington, D.C.



World War II soldiers on a dangerous mission behind enemy lines to find and retrieve one man: Private James Ryan. (AP Photo/Paramount Pictures/David James)

By **CHELSEA J. CARTER** , Associated Press (ASAP)
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WASHINGTON (AP) _ It began with a simple idea: show some movies to honor the U.S. military. It culminates with a first-of-its-kind Memorial Day weekend film festival where the subjects are members of the American armed forces.

The GI Film Festival is bringing together filmmakers, actors, producers, directors, film historians and soldiers in the nation's capital. It began Friday for what organizers hope will be an annual event.

Brandon Millett, the festival founder, said the idea for the festival came after organizers realized something simple: Nothing like it had ever been done.

"We wanted to create a vehicle for the expression of support for our men and women in uniform," said Millett, former director of communications for the conservative nonprofit Judicial Watch. "In the political tussle over whether we should be in one conflict or not, we feel sometimes the troops get lost."

Which raises two important questions: What is a military film festival? And what movies should be shown?

The festival will offer two types of screenings, commercial and independent films, as well as panel discussions. Commercial films include "The Great Raid" and "Saving Private Ryan"; a few

surprises, such as "Forrest Gump"; and some omissions, such as "Platoon," "Born On the Fourth of July," "Gardens of Stone," "Hamburger Hill" and "The Longest Day."

Millett said the festival required that a leading actor or director be present for every film screened at the festival, which limited the films that could be shown.

The festival also received 120 submissions, including documentaries, full-length features and short features. Twenty-two of the films will be screened over the weekend.

The only requirement for the submissions, Millett said, was the films had to "portray soldiers with respect and dignity. Otherwise, it was wide open to everyone."

Actor Gary Sinise, who portrayed the military officer Lt. Dan in "Forrest Gump," is being honored at the festival with an award for his support of the military. Sinise has made five trips to Iraq to meet American troops.

To Sinise, the movie fit into the festival's lineup because of its positive portrayal of a disabled veteran. "They probably stay away from something like a 'Platoon' that shows the films they thought show GIs going a little crazy," he said. "They are sticking to films that honor these men."

But the mention of "Forrest Gump" as a war movie to military service members raised eyebrows.

"With a military film festival, I think 'Heartbreak Ridge.' I think 'The Patriot.' I think 'We Were Soldiers Once ... and Young.' I even think 'Full Metal Jacket,'" said Tech Sgt. Philip Shaw, 32, of Richlands, Va.

"I don't think 'Forrest Gump'," he said. "I absolutely loved it, but it was 30 minutes of anti-war protests, and one voice in the crowd of true American values as I see them."

Seaman Joshua Day, 22, of Sacramento, Calif., said military movies should "show what the military does."

"You have to get into what the military really does," he said. "You have to show the gore of war, how you do everything in your power to make sure that the guy next to you goes home."

Both men wouldn't be opposed to seeing grittier films in the lineup, such as Oliver Stone's "Platoon."

"It addressed some realities in the combat zone," Shaw said.

Film critic Leonard Maltin applauded the idea of a military film festival but encouraged organizers to look at other film options in the future.

"I would just encourage them to dig a little deeper into film history to find not only great films but relevant films," he said. "you go back and you watch films made 50, 60, 70 years ago, and you often find characters expressing the same sentiment today on the battlefield and on the homefront."

Millett said the festival was screening many graphic as well as emotional films.

"We are not theoretically against showing the difficulties, the challenges, the horrors of war," he said. "We wanted to make sure we placed the focus where it belonged."

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