

# Private Ryan fans invade D-Day sites

BY JANE HUGHES

ALLIED war cemeteries in north-west France are preparing for an invasion by an army of history tourists, captivated by *Saving Private Ryan*. Steven Spielberg's gritty celluloid depiction of the D-Day landings.

In the US, where the film was released two months ago, the harrowingly realistic *Private Ryan* has fired the imagination of younger generations insulated from the events of the Second World War by time and the silence of veterans.

The brutality of the film's first 30 minutes of battle scenes on Omaha beach has, for many people, given the events of 54 years ago an immediacy and relevance lacking in other, more gung-ho movies.

Yan Baczkowski, of the French tourist board, said the landing scenes have had a profound impact on many Americans, leading them to "take a second look at how they remember these soldiers and their role in the war".

Mr Baczkowski said enquiries to the tourist board's US office were up 25 per cent in what is usually a quiet time of year. Battlefield tour operators have told officials at the Omaha American cemetery to expect a big increase in tourists in next year's summer season, which coincides with the 55th anniversary of the D-Day landings.

"Younger visitors are saying the movie has completely

changed the way they think about the war," said Michael Green, assistant superintendent of the cemetery, which sits above the beach. "It made them realise what the soldiers had to go through to get to the top. That has a huge impact on them when they see the place for themselves.

"The film has made the landings very real to people and they spend longer here and ask lots of questions about what happened. I don't know how many will plan a trip especially, but if they come to Europe I think they will say 'Hey, I'll go to Omaha while I'm there'."

The Normandy tourist board said books and films about the Second World War had a great influence on tourism over the past 10 years and *Saving Private Ryan* would have a similar effect. "It is a film that leaves an impression on people of all ages and once you get people interested they are staggered to realise that the battlefields are so accessible."

The power of one film to create such a strong and lasting emotional reaction in people is something US tour operator Sue Ryder-Scott puts down to a *fin de siècle* search for values, and a realisation that the survivors of the war will not be around much longer.

"The film has encouraged



Scenes such as this in Steven Spielberg's 'Saving Private Ryan' have moved young Americans to see the battlefields and war cemeteries in north-west France for themselves

veterans to break their silences and start telling their own stories. People are saying: 'My father stayed quiet for all those years and I didn't have a clue.'

"They are beginning to feel a sense of duty toward the soldiers. Going to see where the war took place is the next step. We're also at the end of the millennium. At a time when our President's life is a bit of a grey

area, people want to look back to a time when there was a very clear sense of right and wrong."

Bob Anderson, a Vietnam veteran from Los Angeles, has booked early for a D-Day tour next year and thinks *Saving Private Ryan* has performed a public service for Americans brought up on idealistic portrayals of war.

"The landing scenes were

the first time we have seen something that reflected the randomness of how war really is. The American public didn't see the devastation the war caused in Europe and nor did we talk about the guilt of the survivors. It's too bad it has taken so long for the truth to come out - maybe it would have influenced what happened in Vietnam."

Ann Hubble, of the Royal

British Legion's pilgrimages department, says the interest in battleground sites is a combination of interest in the film, the inclusion of war history in the school curriculum and the popularity of special-interest holidays.

When novelist Sebastian Faulks began to write his First World War novel *Birdsong*, he says, people told him he was completely mad. "They said the

war was so remote and was such an awful subject that nobody would want to read about it." In fact, he received more than 1,000 letters after the book was published. Many people thanked him for the light it shed on what had happened in their own families.

"A lot said the book inspired them to visit the Western Front, but it was not a morbid journey.

One woman said the book helped her come to terms with her father's cruelty to her after he returned from the war."

Mike Hodgson, of Middlebrook Hodgson Battlefield Tours, which specialises in the First World War, said: "Everybody wants to see where these things happened, because books and films bring the period to life."