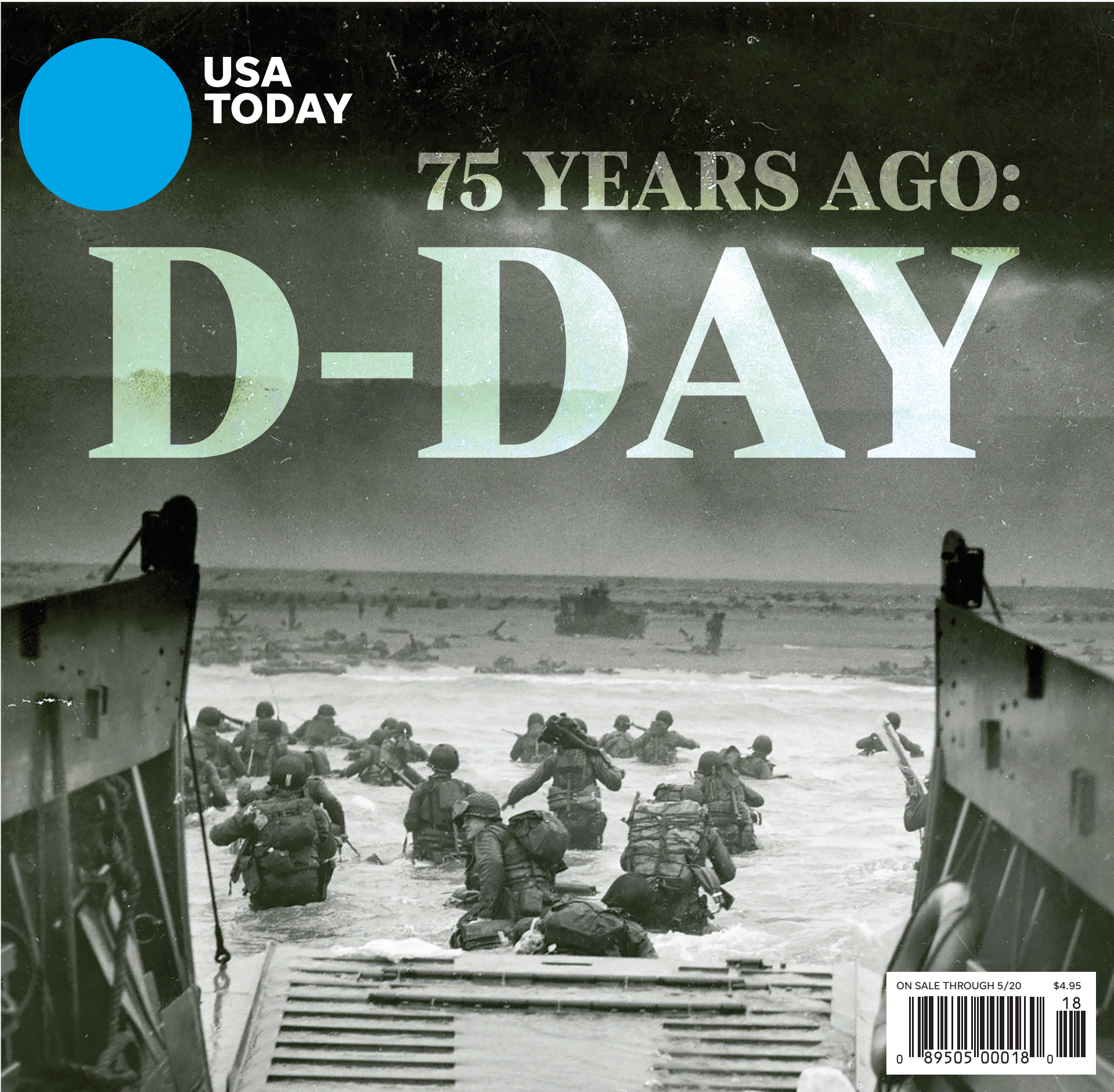



Remembering the heroes of the ‘Great Crusade’ in WWII



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FILM

WWII's epic sweep is truly cinematic

Reflecting its size and stakes, the war has inspired thousands of movies — and even its own film festival

Matt Alderton Special to USA TODAY

People don't typically applaud things that make them feel anguished or agitated. But when *Saving Private Ryan* premiered on July 24, 1998, that's exactly what audiences did. For 2 hours and 49 minutes, they bit their nails, cried, recoiled in their seats and gripped their armrests, or their neighbors' unsuspecting hands. And when it was over, many rose in a standing ovation.

The gravity of Steven Spielberg's film is perfectly captured in its opening scene — 25 harrowing minutes that depict in explicit, blood-soaked detail the landing of U.S. troops on Omaha Beach during the D-Day invasion of June 6, 1944.

"It's a tremendous opening scene ... that immediately plunges the viewer into the hell of war for a sustained period of time," says Marsha Gordon, professor of film studies at North Carolina State University and author of *Film is Like a Battleground: Sam Fuller's War Movies*. "Spielberg demonstrates a strong commitment to pic-



Soldiers of the 2nd Ranger Battalion approach Omaha Beach in their landing craft in *Saving Private Ryan*. In front: Tom Sizemore, left, and Tom Hanks. DREAMWORKS

75TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE
NORMANDY INVASION

turing the grotesque realities of combat — the seasick vomiting just before the landing, the surprise death by enemy fire before the men even get into the water and the unsparing look at bodies torn apart or being burned by enemy fire.”

The scene is visceral. Not just because it's horrifying, but also because it's heroic. “There were tremendous losses and sacrifices during World War II ... but there was a collective sense that those losses were worth the larger victory for humanity,” Gordon says. “Because it was so ambitious, strategic, dramatic, risky and successful — so American, you might say — D-Day is a perfect distillation for what went right during the war.”

The sheer immensity of the conflict, and of its stakes, explains why there are so many films about World War II. The online film database IMDb lists more than 6,500 of them.

“To me, it's the most fascinating time period in the history of the world,” says filmmaker Tim Gray, founder of the World War II Foundation, a nonprofit production company whose educational documentaries about WWII air on American Public Television. “It really was a world war — everybody was affected in some way — and so many of the stories from that time period still resonate.”

Gray says traditional film festivals aren't interested in those stories, despite audiences' continued appetite for them. So in 2017 he started his own: the Normandie World War II International Film Festival. This year's installment of the festival will take place June 2-7, coinciding with the 75th anniversary of D-Day.

“A lot of film festivals reject historical films right away because they think of history as something old and dusty,” Gray says. “But there are people around the world who are still telling incredible stories from the war 75 years later, and I wanted to give them an opportunity to share them.”

Gray's festival receives about 100 entries a year across three categories: short film, documentary film and feature film. The winner in each category is screened during the week-long festival. The festival also hosts a reunion of actors from *Band of Brothers*, the 2001 HBO miniseries, based on real events, that follows a unit of U.S. paratroopers from training, through D-Day to the end of the war. The actors — about two dozen had committed to this year's event as of this writing — serve as judges, attend the festival's opening event alongside WWII veterans and participate in autograph signings,



The 2001 HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers* dramatized the story of a unit from the 101st Airborne Division that participated in D-Day and other major operations. The miniseries was based on the book of the same name by historian Stephen Ambrose and was executive produced by Stephen Spielberg and *Saving Private Ryan* star Tom Hanks. HBO VIA GETTY IMAGES

private tours of Normandy, dinners and, finally, an awards ceremony recognizing the festival winners.

“The actors have been our biggest supporters,” says Gray, whose foundation also commissions WWII monuments and recently opened a Global Education Center in South Kingstown, R.I., where school groups, educators and researchers can learn and interact with veterans' personal stories. “*Band of Brothers* wasn't just a role for them. They played actual veterans, so they felt tremendous pressure and responsibility to live up to the men they portrayed. They're emotionally invested in the work we do because of that.”

Their emotional investment matches that of the ambitious filmmakers who participate in the festival.

Among last year's winners was Hono-

lulu-based filmmaker Stacey Hayashi, whose film *Go for Broke* was named Outstanding Feature Film. Hayashi grew up near Pearl Harbor and spent 18 years making her movie, which tells the story of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, considered the most decorated infantry unit of its size and length of service in the history of the U.S. Army.

The 442nd was made up of Americans of Japanese descent, who volunteered to fight for their country even though their families had been rounded up and imprisoned in camps after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. In less than two years of combat, the unit earned more than 18,000 medals, including 9,486 Purple Hearts and 21 Medals of Honor.

“Almost half the population in Hawaii at that time was Japanese American. They were American citizens, and to

have their patriotism questioned really hurt them. That's why they became so highly decorated — because they had something to prove,” says Hayashi, who wrote and produced the film based on a graphic novel she created. “To be able to bring that story from one iconic World War II location to another — from Pearl Harbor to Normandy — was really special because most people who know about Pearl Harbor and Normandy don't know what the local people who actually lived there experienced.”

Although the window for capturing such stories is shrinking — of the 16 million Americans who served in World War II, fewer than 500,000 are still alive, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs — the will to tell them on screen continues to grow thanks to filmmakers like Gray and Hayashi.