

★ CHAPTER 5 ★

CHANGING HISTORY

In the original screenplay for the 2002 MGM movie *Windtalkers*, there is a scene in which a Marine, nicknamed The Dentist, creeps across a battlefield strewn with the bodies of dead Japanese soldiers. In the original script we see: “The Dentist bent over a dead Japanese soldier, doing what he does, relieving the dead of the gold in their mouth. The Dentist twists his bayonet, struggles to get the gold nugget out of the corpse’s teeth.”

“Come to Poppa,” says The Dentist.

It’s a grisly scene, but it’s one of several that you didn’t see in the movie, which was directed by John Woo and starred Nicolas Cage, Christian Slater, and Adam Beach. The scene was written out of later drafts of the screenplay after Phil Strub and the Marine Corps complained about it.

After receiving the original *Windtalkers* script, dated January 28, 2000, Strub passed it along to Capt. Matt Morgan, who was then the head of the Marine Corps’ film liaison office in Los Angeles. Morgan, six feet four and boyish, liked the script a lot, but had some major reservations.

In a March 3, 2000, memo to Strub, Morgan discussed the scene in which “the Dentist digs gold from jaws of corpses.”

“This has to go,” Morgan wrote to Strub. “The activity is un-Marine, and more representative of a conscript force. The Marines were volunteers. I recommend these characters be looting the dead for intelligence,

or military souvenirs—swords, knives, field glasses. Loot is still not cool, but more realistic and less brutal.”

Strub agreed. “Stealing gold teeth, yep, has to go!” he told Morgan in a March 7 reply.

Four days later, Morgan sent a memo to Terence Chang, director John Woo’s producing partner. “The ‘Dentist’ character displays distinctly un-Marine behavior,” he told Chang. “He is, in fact, committing an atrocity. While I recognize the war in the Pacific was brutal, I don’t see a need to portray a Marine as a ghoul.”

In the next draft of the script, dated June 23, 2000, the scene was eliminated, as was the entire character of The Dentist.

“The scene just went away,” Morgan says during an interview at his office on Wilshire Boulevard. “It completely went away.”

The film’s screenwriters, Joe Batteer and John Rice, fought to keep the scene in the film, but they were badly outnumbered—by the director, the Marine Corps, and the studio, which wanted to keep the Marine Corps happy. In the end, the writers relented and killed the scene.

“That scene’s not in the film,” Batteer says. “Through Terence Chang we got the word. It was, ‘You gotta lose the filling pulling.’ We saw Morgan’s missive about the ghoulishness. We argued that it was true, but we ultimately relented and yanked it, no pun intended. We tried to argue our case, but it was a fine line because we had to appease the Marine Corps and the studio. The studio wanted the cooperation from the Marines.”

“They said a Marine would never do that,” Rice says of the tooth-pulling scene. “But who can say one Marine would never do that? The Marine Corps had a lot of problems with that.”

“People did those kinds of things,” Chang says of the tooth-pulling scene, “but the Marines would rather not have us portray Marines in that light.”

Windtalkers is a fictional accounting of the Code Talkers’ story, yet it is based on historical facts. But when the Pentagon has a hand in the drafting of screenplays—even fictional stories—questions arise about whose version of history is being portrayed. The DOD’s guidelines for assisting movies say “the production must be authentic in its portrayal of actual persons, places, military operations and historical events. Fictional portrayals must depict a feasible interpretation of military life, operations and policies.”

But despite his claim that the kind of atrocity committed by The Dentist in the original script was “un-Marine,” such events actually did occur during the war. Indeed, the National Archives has footage of a Marine yanking gold teeth from the jaw of a dead Japanese soldier.

Questioned about his version of Marine history, Morgan acknowledged that the Marines had committed such crimes during the war. Morgan says that when he met with Chang, he told the producer, “Okay. Here’s the problem. Now you can look at various books about Marines in World War II, and this obviously happened. I know that these things happened. Horrible, awful atrocities happened, especially in the Pacific. And that was different from what happened in Europe because those were white people fighting white people, and these were, you know, white people fighting Asians. And so, because we didn’t look like each other, we tended to do more dehumanizing things. That’s a fact.”

The DOD and the Marine Corps weren’t the only ones worried about the script. Morgan says he first learned of the project in 1999 while in Texas providing military assistance to the popular TV show *Walker, Texas Ranger*. He got a frantic phone call from an assistant at movie producer Gale Anne Hurd’s Los Angeles–based production company.

“Have you seen the *Reporter*?” the assistant asked, referring to the venerable Hollywood trade paper.

“No,” Morgan replied.

“John Woo is going to be doing this movie about the Code Talkers and it’s about these guys and they’re supposed to kill the Code Talkers,” said the angry assistant. “We think it’s disgraceful. You guys have to stop this.”

Morgan was perplexed about the caller’s distress. This was the first he’d heard of a movie project based on the Code Talkers—Navajo Indians who joined the Marines during World War II and used their native language as part of a code that the Japanese were never able to break. Hurd’s assistant faxed him the story from the *Reporter*. It said that Nicolas Cage would play a Marine guard assigned to protect a Code Talker—and to kill him in the event of capture by the Japanese.

When he got back to the Marine Corps’ film liaison office in Los Angeles, Morgan called Hurd’s production company for clarification and set up a meeting.

“I came to find out that Gale Anne Hurd had a competing Navajo

Code Talker project,” Morgan says with a laugh. “And they were like, ‘You need to call them and tell them that they can’t do this movie!’ And I’m like, ‘Hey, you know, this is a First Amendment issue here. I can’t just call up and say, ‘You can’t do that movie.’”

Morgan, a sincere and dedicated Marine, wouldn’t try to stop the movie. That was never an option. But he was not averse to suggesting that changes be made in the screenplay that would cast the Marines in a more positive light than originally scripted.

Another scene in the original script that Morgan and Strub didn’t like involved a war crime committed by the lead character, Cpl. (later Sgt.) Joe Enders, played by Nicolas Cage. In the original screenplay, Cage kills an injured Japanese soldier who is attempting to surrender by blasting him with a flamethrower. After Morgan complained, however, that scene was also eliminated.

In his March 3 memo to Strub, Morgan wrote: “Killing this man is potentially a war crime, and an experienced Marine in a signal unit would know how rare and valuable a Japanese prisoner is.”

Morgan relayed his concerns to Chang, and that scene, too, was written out of the script. “In the end,” he says, “John (Woo) didn’t like that scene either, and it went away.”

Once again, the screenwriters had fought to keep their vision intact, but in the end, they had to bow to pressure from the Marine Corps and the director.

“We fought very hard to keep something along those lines,” Batteer says of the flamethrower scene. “It showed that Enders was enraged and wanted to kill Japanese. We didn’t want to paint him in a positive light. We wanted to show him as a damaged guy.”

Chang says that he and Woo “hated that scene” because “it was too brutal. It would be very hard for the audience to sympathize with Enders later on in the movie.”

As in any film production, tensions can arise about whose vision—the writer’s or the director’s or the producer’s—is going to make it to the screen. But when the military is involved, the writer almost always loses.

“Everybody has an agenda,” says screenwriter Batteer. “It’s a collaborative art form. You have the writer and the director and the studio, and in this case, you also have the USMC, and everybody has their points of view, and everybody compromises.”

The military also demanded that the producers change a scene in which Enders is given direct orders to kill his Navajo Code Talker in the event of imminent capture. The battle over this scene raged for weeks, even though, like the deleted scenes that depicted atrocities and war crimes committed by U.S. Marines, it was based on the historical record. But once again the Marine Corps' version of history would clash with the screenwriters'. Only this time the writers' version was backed, not just by the Code Talkers themselves, but by the U.S. Congress.

It was pouring rain in Washington, DC, on the morning of July 26, 2001, as the black limousines pulled up in front of the Capitol building. Black umbrellas popped open as the A-list guests emerged from the long line of limos and hurried into the Capitol Rotunda. Senators, movie stars, and top military brass were on hand. So was Pres. George W. Bush. But the stars of the day were four old Navajo Code Talkers, former Marines who had helped win the war in the Pacific so many years ago. The Japanese never broke the code, and after the war, an American general said that the Marines could not have won the battle of Iwo Jima without the Code Talkers. The code was so top secret that the military did not disclose its existence until 1969.

And now, all these years later, they were going to receive Congressional Gold Medals—the nation's highest civilian honor—at a ceremony inside the ornate rotunda.

Screenwriters Batteer and Rice, whose film had just finished shooting in Hawaii, were also on hand, sitting just a couple of seats back from the front row. They had a keen interest in the ceremony, and the irony of it was not lost on them. They had run into problems with the Pentagon over a key plot point—one that the Pentagon said was false, but which Congress said was true—that the Code Talkers' Marine guards had been given direct orders to kill them in the event of imminent capture.

"Our story hangs on that in a lot of ways," Batteer says.

"But the Marines said it never happened, and insisted that the script be changed. There is no documented evidence that there was such an order," Morgan says. "It's fiction."

In the end, producers Alison Rosenzweig and Tracie Graham-Rice, who had originally brought the project to MGM, had to reluctantly agree to tone down that angle if they wanted to get the military's assistance.

"The filmmakers had to change the script," says a source on the film. "What ends up in the movie is that it is an implied order, not a direct order. The DOD would not let them say the words 'order' or 'kill.'"

But Batteer and Rice had done their homework, finding numerous instances in the historical record to support this element of the story. And besides, how could the Pentagon know today what orders were given in the field more than fifty years ago?

"We felt it was true," Rice says. "The Pentagon could never know, but their inherent tendency was to deny it, knowing that we could never prove it."

Chang also believes it's true. "The whole movie was based on that assumption," he says. "We did talk to Code Talkers, and they said that was true. Why would they lie to me? But I also understand the Marines' position."

Over the years, several of the real Code Talkers have said that they were told of the orders to kill them.

John Brown Jr., one of the original twenty-nine Code Talkers, told *Reader's Digest* that he knows that he was to be shot if he were in danger of falling into enemy hands.

"The Marine order was to let them shoot you if you were captured," he said. "That was war. We were obligated."

Carl Gorman agreed. Gorman was the oldest of the original Code Talkers. He died in 1998 at the age of ninety. Two years earlier, he was interviewed by Harry Smith, on the *CBS Evening News*, about his experiences during the war.

"Orders was given that if any of the Code Talkers being captured, shoot the Code Talkers," Gorman told Smith in his imperfect English.

Batteer and Rice believed the Navajo sources, and based their story on the crisis of conscience a Marine faces when he is given orders that may lead to his having to kill a fellow Marine. They finished the first draft of their script on July 1, 1999, and handed it over to their producers at MGM.

In the original version of the script, Cpl. Joe Enders, played by Nicolas Cage, is given those direct orders by a Marine major, who tells Enders: "We can't risk one of our Code Talkers falling into enemy hands. If there's a chance that he might be captured, the code will be deemed more important than the man. If it comes to it, Enders, you're going to have to take your guy out."

The Marine Corps, however, cringes at the idea of Marines being ordered to kill other Marines.

"We got a call from the producers," Batteer recalls. "I think it was Terence Chang, who said, 'We need to alter some of the language in the orders-given scene.' He said there were concerns by the Marines about those orders being so explicit. They essentially denied that such orders were given. The Pentagon requested that the language be altered to make it not quite so specific, so that those words were not spoken. We got notes from Capt. Matt Morgan. The Marines wanted some changes."

After lengthy negotiations, the producers agreed to change the script so that the orders to kill the Code Talkers in the event of capture could be suggested, but not stated specifically.

In the final shooting version of the script, dated May 4, 2000, in the scene where the Marine major gives Corporal Enders his assignment, the dialogue has been changed so that the major now says: "Corporal, what I'm about to tell you is not to leave this room. Under no circumstances can you allow your Code Talker to fall into enemy hands. Your mission is to protect the code at all costs. Do you understand, corporal?"

Here, the message is implied, but not stated directly: the words "orders" and "take your guy out" have been eliminated.

Even so, in the end, the writers were relieved that the Pentagon would allow them to suggest that orders to kill the Code Talkers had been given—even if they couldn't come right out and say it.

"If we couldn't intimate that the bodyguard might kill the Code Talker, then we would have had to go outside the military or not make the movie," Rice says. "But we got that."

And even though they made the changes requested by the Pentagon, Rice and Batteer feel that the integrity of their film has been maintained.

"The integrity is still there," Rice believes. "It did not hurt us a bit. I think it made us better writers to make it more subtle. The Pentagon may not have been trying to help us on this point, but I think they did."

Batteer was relieved that the Pentagon didn't insist on more changes. "We were happy that that's all they wanted," he says.

On December 21, 2000, Pres. Bill Clinton signed legislation that authorized the president to present Congressional Gold Medals to the twenty-nine original Code Talkers, and Silver Medals to more than four hundred other Code Talkers.

And now, on July 26, 2001, with thunder clapping outside the Capitol Rotunda, Batteer and Rice watched as President Bush presented the medals to four of the five surviving original Code Talkers. One of those old Marines was John Brown Jr., who maintains that his Marine guard had been ordered to kill him if he was in danger of being captured.

“Today we give these exceptional Marines the recognition they earned so long ago,” Bush somberly intoned as he handed out the medals.

The language of the legislation was unequivocal: “Some Code Talkers were guarded by fellow Marines, whose role was to kill them in case of imminent capture by the enemy.”

As they waited for the ceremony to begin, Rice and Batteer were well aware that the very same language the Pentagon had forced the producers to remove from their screenplay—the orders to kill the Code Talkers in the event of capture—was contained in the bill Congress had passed authorizing Bush to present the medals to the Code Talkers.

“It was kind of ironic,” Rice says.

The Marine Corps, however, still insists that no such orders were ever given, and is trying to get Congress to rewrite the wording of the bill that gave the Code Talkers their medals.