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Hua for Hollywood

Uncle Sam plays a major role when the movies go to war

By Dave Domingo

"Hoo-wah!"

The Army jargon has been famous ever since Al Pacino threw it around in "Scent of a Woman."

Actually, real soldiers don't say "Hoo-wah!" They say "Hua" – less of an exclamation and more of a nod. What Rolling Stone writer P.J. O'Rourke called "an all-purpose noise of enthusiasm" is more or less a synonym for "Yeah" with all its shades of meaning: "OK," "That's true," "I agree," "Amen" and similar affirmations.

It's also used as an adjective meaning "admirable," "hard-core," "Armylike."

Hollywood's master of hua is Capt. Dale Dye, a 22-year Marine Corps veteran who has dug into the military movie market as a consultant, actor and writer.

Ever since he took the job of technical adviser for "Platoon" in 1986, Dye, 53, has seemed to find his way into almost every production with a military element. He's played joes and officers in dozens of movies. He wrote "Fire Birds," the 1990 counterdrug operation story starring Nicolas Cage, Sean Young and the AH-64 Apache attack helicopter.

But through Warriors Inc., the company Dye formed 13 years ago with a handful of men he served with in Vietnam, Dye has made a business out of transforming actors into troops.

For "Platoon," director Oliver Stone let Dye take 30 actors 85 miles into the jungles of the Philippines.

"In order to get really terrific performance out of actors, what's really neat is to give them a taste of what a plain soldier goes through, so they have a basis to build a truthful and dramatic performance," Dye says in a phone interview. "I don't know any way of doing that without immersing the actors in the daily life of a soldier."

Dye says he's done a similar boot camp for almost every movie he's consulted on. Most recently, Dye subjected the cast of Steven Spielberg's "Saving Private Ryan" to a preproduction Stanislavskian hell: a 10-day amphibious method-acting drill so realistic that, according to Premiere magazine, the actors huddled together and voted on whether to stay or quit.

"They were cold, lonely, tired and wanted to go home," Dye says. "But I've been that many times, and many soldiers have been that."

"Saving Private Ryan" opens July 24. The D-Day invasion epic stars Tom Hanks, Tim Sizemore and Edward Burns, with Matt Damon as the young troop lost behind enemy lines.

To explain his approach to realism, Dye shares some of what he calls "warriors' philosophy":

"We are a media-saturated society. You get images, even if you're not interested in them particularly. If what you see in the theater doesn't match what you've been bombarded with ... you're going to disconnect. You're not going to be able to suspend your disbelief."

And that's where Dye comes in.

"I get over the cognitive dissonance that people have."

But not everything in a movie has to be hua. “I approach it just like I would approach a combat operation,” Dye says. “The key is to win the war. Occasionally you have to lose a few firefights. What’s critical is the performance of the actors ... how they talk, how they move, how they handle weapons. All this to me conveys a trained soldier.

“The uniforms need to be right; the weapons need to be the right ones, and they need to be fired correctly.”

Likewise packs and haircuts. Those details have to be right “so that people can relate,” Dye says.

The producers of “Saving Private Ryan” didn’t depend solely on Dye for technical advice. They also went to the Army for help with the script and to record authentic battle sounds.

On the 12th floor of the Oppenheimer Tower in Westwood, Kathleen Ross and her task force – a major and a master sergeant – stand ready to share their expertise – and often people, places and things – to help movies be more realistic.

As chief of the Los Angeles branch of the Army’s Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, Ross, 44, offers filmmakers realism.

But where Dye focuses on actors’ skills, for the Army the story seems to be the thing.

Often the Army limits its movie role to technical advice, or “courtesy assistance.”

For “Saving Private Ryan,” Ross’ office helped make the script more believable and allowed Universal Pictures to record battle sounds.

But the Army can also offer something Dye really can’t: “full support” – any combination of Army people, Army facilities and Army equipment. In order to get full support, a filmmaker has to submit the story to Ross’ office for review.

Those who fear censorship can relax. Ross isn’t there to suppress unpatriotic expressions but to help make things accurate – which can be as good for the story as it is for the Army.

But sometimes no compromise can be found.

“They need their artistic vision, and we need accuracy,” Ross says.

For the 1996 Gulf War drama “Courage Under Fire,” the Army provided courtesy assistance. “We even took Denzel Washington and Meg Ryan up to the NTC,” Ross says, referring to the Army’s National Training Center at Fort Irwin, a desert maneuver site near Barstow. But ultimately, the producers opted to go without full Army support in order to preserve the film’s storyline.

“There were problems with the script where if the production company addressed our concerns, the film would have lost some of its drama,” Ross says.

When filmmakers are willing to adapt based on Army input, it can change the whole direction of the project.

“‘Renaissance Man’ is a good example,” she says. In the 1994 peacetime comedy/drama, Danny DeVito plays a civilian teacher hired to help some ‘slow’ recruits get through basic training.

“When they first came to us, their idea of the Army seemed to be like ‘Sgt. Bilko’ from the late 1950s. Kind of a bunch of Sad Sacks who were fairly incompetent.

“However, when we took (director) Penny Marshall and others from there to actually visit the Army, they came back with a wonderful story – and that was fully supported.”

Ironically, the Army supported the original “Sgt. Bilko” TV series. The technical adviser for the show was actor/war veteran George Kennedy.

By contrast, the 1996 movie version of “Sgt. Bilko” starring Steve Martin is a project that sought Army support but didn’t get it. Its story and characters were too far removed from reality, Ross says.

But “In the Army Now,” in which Pauly Shore is deployed to the Middle East as an Army Reservist, was fully supported. The difference, it seems, was the producers’ flexibility. “We had to make some adjustments so that they would get the humor and the comedy they needed while the Army did not look totally ridiculous,” Ross says. “And we think it worked.”

Like Dye, Ross accepts that not everything can be hua.

“Because of the nature of a movie, you can only focus on a few characters, so movies always focus on individuals doing exceptional things, and you don’t really get the feeling for all of the teamwork and all of the support that goes into doing an operation.”

It’s an even-keeled attitude. Hollywood may be the only theater of war where a compromise is seen as a victory.

Still, whether it’s the norm or not, the movie industry’s knack for exaggeration can be demoralizing.

Ross refers to “World War II: A Chronicle of Soldiering,” by James Jones, author of “From Here to Eternity.” She flips quickly to a paragraph she says she often quotes:

“Another thing that irritated the retreat was the movies. They didn’t understand anything about the war, and they didn’t try to understand. Instead of trying to show the distressing complexity and puzzling diffusion of war, they basically pulled everything down to the level of good guy against bad guy.”

“And that’s basically, what movies do,” she says.

Can we get a “Hua”?

[sidebar]

Who’s hua in the movies

Technical adviser Dale Dye says he’s proudest of his work on “JFK,” “Forrest Gump” and “Born on the Fourth of July.”

As for the actors who stand out as particularly hua:

“Tom Cruise is great,” Dye says. “He has a huge heart, and he won’t quit until he gets it right.

“Tom Hanks has a technological mindset and a huge well of human understanding. It’s what makes him a great leader. He’s a guy I’d soldier with.

“I like this new kid Eddie Burns,” Dye says, referring to actor-director-producer-writer Edward Burns, who plays a part in “Saving Private Ryan.”

“He has that iron inner core that makes him very strong.

“Tim Robbins could easily be a soldier-scholar,” he says of the star of “Jacob’s Ladder.” “He’s a guy that intellectually got into it.

“All the Baldwin Boys were excellent students,” he says; then he clarifies that he means Daniel, Stephen and William Baldwin. “All but Alec,” whom Dye never worked with, he says.

Then he reaches back in his memory to 1986. I think that Johnny Depp, whom I had in ‘Platoon,’ showed a great ability to soldier.

“Those were the ones who got it, who really understood.”