Clint Eastwood, Heartbreak Ridge, and vots of a forgotten war

Korean War army veterans are fighting mad at the mayor of Carmel, Calif.

It seems that Clint Eastwood, the Dirty Harry of California politics — he occa-
sionally undertakes an acting role — is playing the male lead in a bazaar opera called "Heartbreak Ridge," which Warner Brothers will release this Christmas.

The laconic "man with no name" portrays a tough Marine gunnery sergeant — is there any other kind? — who is the only survivor of a 12-man action in the Korean War battle of the same name. Near the end of his career, he goes through the heartbreak of losing the woman in his life.

There's only one problem: while the Marines racked up their share of victories in Korea — the defense of the Pusan Perimeter, the Inchon landing, the breakout from "Frozen Chosin,

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Koto-ri and many another forgotten (except by those who were there) battle — there were no Marine units involved in the month-long struggle for Hills 931, 894 and 851, the Heartbreak Ridge of real life.

Sure, Marine pilots flew ground-support sorties for the Army. There may even have been a few Marine liaison officers and individual Marines involved in "liberation" missions who got caught up in the battle (the Marines equipped whole battalions with thermal boots obtained from the Army in exchange for jeeps, generators and other equipment previously "liberated" from the Army).

But Heartbreak Ridge, one of the bloodiest battles of them all, was an Army show. That piece of real estate was bought for America with the lives of more than 800 Dogfaces of the Second Infantry Division, with a French battalion attached. Another 4,000 Cis were wounded, missing in action or captured before the exhausted 23rd Infantry Regiment finally stormed the last peak of Heartbreak Ridge in October of 1951.

Gettysburg it wasn't. But that's grinning a lot of meat. And Hollywood owes it to those who went through that bloody hell — and to those who didn't make it — to get its facts straight.

Mr. Eastwood and the film's producers (Malpaso Productions) assert that Army vets, who threaten to picket the movie unless the title is changed and script references to Heartbreak Ridge are removed, are "shooting from the hip." They say the movie is a character study, not a war movie, and that the "heartbreak" involved is old gunnery's loss of his woman.

But that's not good enough for Bill Temple, a twice-wounded Second Infantry Division veteran, who fought in Korea as an 18-year-old.

"This is a visual age," says Mr. Temple. "If you were an Army vet who lost his arm at Heartbreak Ridge, you wouldn't want your kid seeing a movie that said it was a Marine victory."

The Pentagon agrees with Mr. Temple, who hails from Bryn Mawr, Pa., and is asking Malpaso (Mr. Eastwood's production company) to change the title of the film.

"The title is not appropriate for the script that they have," says Donald Barush, an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs.

But Hizzoner, having sounded the charge, is reluctant to retreat (Mr. Eastwood, who was 20-year-old prime beef when the Korean War broke out, was not among those present at Heartbreak Ridge).

"How did it all happen? Well, it seems Malpaso went first to the Army for production help. But the Army, which can be a bit stuffy, didn't like some of the language in the script (as the late John Wayne could have told old Clint, those who served in Korea never used expletives rougher than "Oh, fudge" or "Heavens to Betsy"). So Malpaso went to the Marines, who know the value of a little box-office.

Filming began at the Marine base of Camp Pendleton in California, and in the Caribbean.

There the matter stood until July 26, when Mr. Temple and some of his buddies wrote to the Commandant of the Marines, Gen. P.X. Kelley, who had served in Korea as a shavetail second lieutenant. Gen. Kelley, who knows a firestorm brewing when he begins to feel the heat, wrote to Mr. Eastwood on July 31 asking for a title change.

The latest dispatch from the front indicates that the title will not be changed, but that parts of the film will be reshot to change Mr. Eastwood into an Army sergeant. Who knows where it all may end?

On a popularity scale, the Korean conflict rates with the War of 1812. It came too soon after World War II, when the country was ready for peace, and it was fought in an obscure corner of northeast Asia. It wasn't even worth protesting about.

There were no bands playing, no ticker-tape parades when our boys came marching home, and today there is no memorial in Washington to those who fought there.

But it really did happen. Some 54,246 Americans lost their lives in three years of brutal fighting. Another 103,284 were wounded, with 8,177 missing in action. Of 7,000 Americans captured, less than half survived their captivity.

For their sake, the mayor of Carmel and others should keep the record straight: Heartbreak Ridge belongs to the Army.