Korean War veterans get one more slap in film's distortion of Heartbreak Ridge

WASHINGTON — Thirty-five years ago, Seymour “Hoppy” Harris was a GI in Korea, a corporal in the Army's 2nd Infantry Division. He was one of the lucky survivors of the bloody, month-long battle for hills 931, 894 and 851, nicknamed Heartbreak Ridge. He has never gotten over it.

As do hundreds of thousands of others who served in that war, he feels his country has forgotten him. When he read a column of mine supporting construction of a Korean War memorial here, he wrote me 20 pages densely packed with memories of the fighting, in which 54,235 Americans died in only 37 months.

He has heard no public recognition of what he did there, but he still has a own bitter pride in it, specifically in having been through the hell of Heartbreak Ridge. Now they are trying to take that away from him, and from the hundreds of plain-dogface soldiers who were killed and wounded there.

"They," this time, means Hollywood. It means Clint Eastwood, the mayor of Carmel, Calif., who acts in his spare time in moviemaking. It means Warner Brothers. It means the military public relations bureaucracy.

They are making a movie named "Heartbreak Ridge," in which Mr. Eastwood stars. He plays an aging warrior who long before became a hero on the ridge. He is cast as a U.S. Marine gunnery sergeant.

The trouble is, the Marines weren't on Heartbreak Ridge. They were at Naktong, Inchon, Chosin and plenty of other battles in Korea, and they have a song list of glorious actions in their past. But not Heartbreak Ridge.

How could this happen? Easy. The Hollywood producers asked the Army to cooperate by providing troops, weapons and gunpowder to make their movie seem real. The Army, apparently shocked by the rough language and action in the script, refused. The producers took it to the Marines' public relations branch.

The Marines, chronically underfunded and undersupplied, are less finicky about publicity. They said sure. But nobody was willing to change the movie's title to someplace the Marines had fought. Heartbreak Ridge has a better box-office ring than Wolmi-do, for example. Once word got out about this discrepancy, Army veterans got upset.

It may be a trivial thing to the busy American in 1986, this squabble over who gets credit for a nasty battle in a war now fading into the haze. But in a nation ignorant of its history, a movie with a megastar can fill the vacuum, can magnify the name Heartbreak Ridge to rank with Normandy and Iwo Jima — and make it stand out in the public mind as another triumph for the U.S. Marines.

When the process was heard, the producers were already so far in they didn't want to back out. The Marines' historical branch confirms that none of its units was involved, and some there agreed with me that seeming to take credit for Heartbreak Ridge would be an embarrassment to the Corps.

Out in California, the studio claims now that there were indeed a couple of Marine battalions somewhere in the vicinity of the ridge, and in fact two Marines won Medals of Honor. But late yesterday, they had not called back to tell me which battalions, and which Marines, and exactly what they did.

Meanwhile, filming goes on at the Marines Camp Pendleton, with Marines doing the simulated fighting. A Marine lieutenant colonel is acting as technical adviser, making sure they get the details right about the final events in Gunnerhy Sgt. Clint Eastwood's proud career.

If they had wanted the details right from the beginning, of course, they would have hired somebody like "Hoppy" Harris as technical adviser. He lives in upstate New York, and is easily available. In his mind there is more about Heartbreak Ridge than in all the after-action reports in the National Archives.

He was among those, he says, "who called ourselves 'scrapes,' because we were 'Hollywood,' he says. "I'd be a lousy hill, which in part they eventually give back anyway?"

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Veterans pushing a bill have been promised repeatedly that it would move — last fall, this spring, last month, before July 4, before Labor Day. Every broken promise is another slap to thousands of Americans who deserve to see that memorial before they die.