

Author goes behind scenes of iconic war film 'Patton'

By Joe Baker

Staff writer

College Museum's Eight Bells Lecture Series.

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It took producer Frank McCarthy nearly 20 years to bring what is now recognized as one of the greatest war movies to the silver screen.

That's one of the behind-the-scenes stories author and Naval War College professor Nicholas E. Sarantakes details in his newly released book, "Making of the Movie 'Patton.'"

McCarthy started his biographical project "Patton" in the early 1950s, but ran into a series of roadblocks and missteps along the way until finally getting the biopic into theaters in 1970. Added into the mix was a dramatic shift in American culture, from the pro-military, anti-Communist attitude when he began to the anti-military, anti-war attitude when he actually was making the movie in the late 1960s.

On Thursday, Sarantakes outlined his work on the book as part of the Naval War

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Although Sarantakes used the McCarthy papers for about 80 percent of the book, he also reviewed a number of oral histories, including one from the screenwriter who had just graduated from college, Francis Ford Coppola. Coppola's version was the one

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that finally convinced George C. Scott to take the part of Patton — a role that would win him the Best Actor Oscar — after he had turned it down once before.

Scott was not alone, Sarantakes said. John Wayne, Robert Mitchum, Rod Serling and Bert Lancaster all turned the part down, he said. Interestingly, Ronald Reagan expressed an interest in it, but was not seriously considered.

However, Coppola's screenplay would have meant a nine-hour movie, so after Coppola left the project, McCarthy brought in Edmund H. North to cut it down to its final 2 hour-12 minute run time.

Although Patton's family members did not cooperate with the moviemakers, Sarantakes said they eventually loved Scott's portrayal of the famed World War II general.

Only two aspects of the general were altered, he said. The movie portrays him as somewhat rebellious. Not so, Sarantakes said.

"Patton was no rebel. He knew how to play the political game in the Army," he said.

Secondly, Scott's gravelly voice was nothing like Patton's.

"Actually, Patton sounded a lot like H. Ross Perot," Sarantakes said.

One of the highest-grossing

war movies of all time, when adjusted for inflation, "Patton" also was highly influential, Sarantakes said. It became President Richard M. Nixon's favorite movie, he said, and the famed opening sequence of Patton's rallying speech in front of a huge American flag has been used by others for motivational reasons.

Marine Corps Lt. Col. Oliver North used a nearly identical scene at the U.S. Naval Academy, Sarantakes said, to convince midshipmen to consider a career in the Corps. And even "The Simpsons" animated series based one of its episodes on the movie, he said.

Sarantakes included lots of smaller details in his book, including the fact that Scott showed up for the opening scene shoot hungover, but did it in one take.

It was no coincidence that Gen. Omar Bradley, played by Karl Malden, comes off as a heroic figure in the movie. Since the Patton family did not cooperate, producers hired Bradley, a close confidant to Patton during World War II, as a consultant for the movie, he said. And director Franklin Schaffner only got the job after several others, including John Huston, turned it down.

"'Patton' was a superior piece of art that inspired strong reactions," Sarantakes said, "because it appealed to simple myths, but actually reflected complex realities."

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