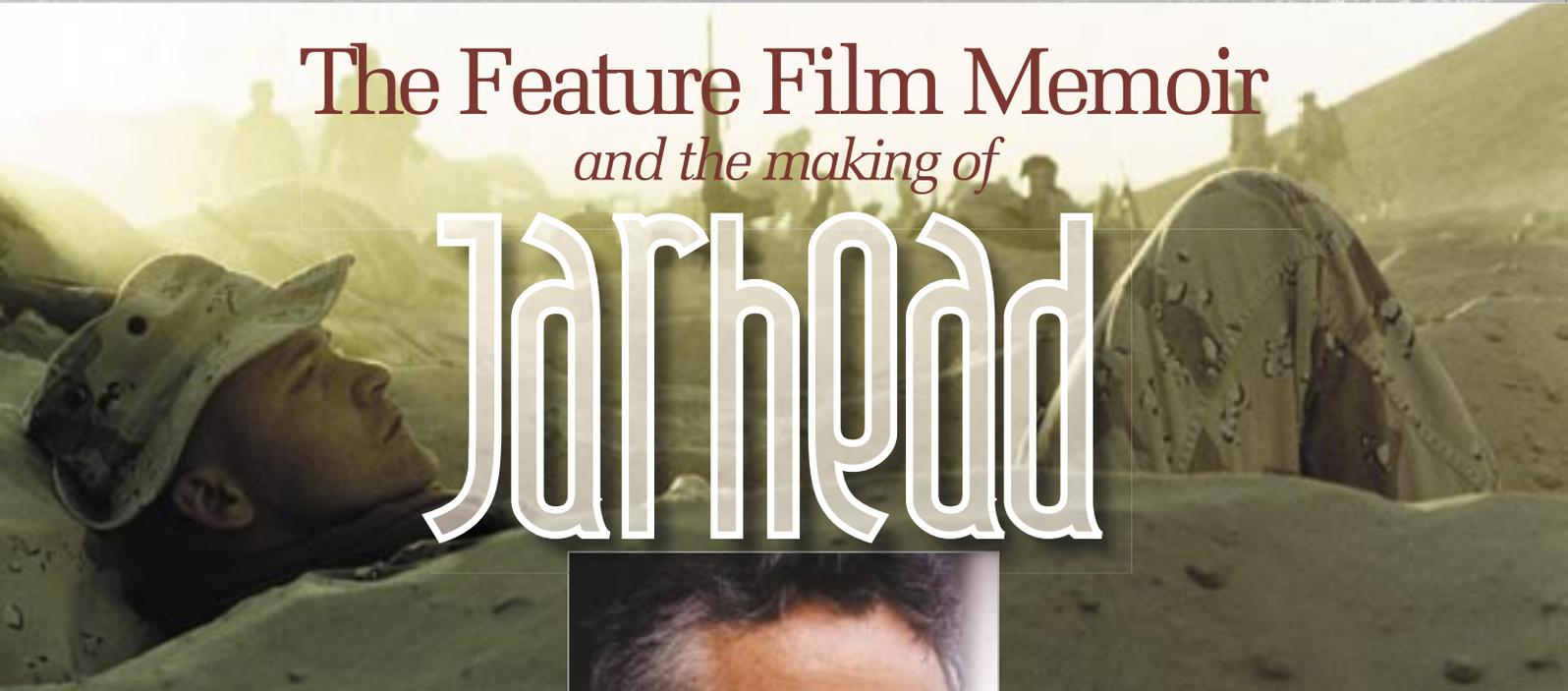


The Feature Film Memoir and the making of

Jarhead



by Kate McCallum

Adaptations of books are a major staple of the film industry. The art of adapting a story from the more internalized literary style of a novel to the external visual language of film is a talent and skill not all screenwriters are able to master. Veteran scribe William Broyles Jr. shares the process behind bringing Marine Anthony Swofford's gripping and visceral memoir, *Jarhead*, to the big screen.

Jake Gyllenhaal (*The Day After Tomorrow*, *Moonlight Mile*), Jamie Foxx (*Ray*, *Collateral*) and Peter Sarsgaard (*Kinsey*, *Boys Don't Cry*) star in Universal Pictures' version of Swofford's recollections of his disorienting firsthand experiences in Desert Storm. *Jarhead* is directed by Academy Award®-winner Sam Mendes (*American Beauty*, *Road to Perdition*) and produced by Oscar®-winner Douglas Wick (*Gladiator*) and Lucy Fisher (*Memoirs of a Geisha*), partners in Red Wagon Entertainment.

Jarhead (the self-imposed moniker of the Marines) follows "Swoff" (played by Gyllenhaal), a third-generation enlistee, from a sobering stint in boot camp to active duty sporting a sniper's rifle and a



Screenwriter **William Broyles Jr.**

100-pound rucksack on his back through Middle Eastern deserts with no cover from intolerable heat or from Iraqi soldiers, who are always potentially over the next horizon. Swoff and his fellow Marines sustain themselves with sardonic humor and wicked comedy on blazing desert fields in a country they don't understand, against an enemy they can't see, for a cause they don't fully fathom.

Foxx portrays Sgt. Sykes, a Marine lifer who heads up Swofford's scout/sniper platoon, while Sarsgaard plays Swoff's friend and mentor Troy, a die-hard member of STA—their elite Marine unit.

Jarhead is an irreverent and true account of a war that was antiseptically packaged a decade ago and is laced with dark wit, honest inquisition and episodes that are surreal and poignant, tragic and absurd.

Bill Broyles grew up in Texas, attended Rice University and Oxford University, worked in the civil rights movement, and finished out the 60s as a Marine infantry lieutenant in Vietnam. Before working full-time as a writer, he was editor-in-chief of *Texas Monthly* and *Newsweek* magazines. He wrote the book *Brothers in Arms* and was the co-creator of the television series *China Beach*, both of which drew upon his experiences in Vietnam.

Broyles wrote the original screenplay for *Cast Away* and co-authored five other screenplays, including the script for *Apollo 13* (which was nominated for an Academy Award and won the WGA Screenplay Award), *Unfaithful* and *The Polar Express*.

scr(i)pt: Whose "great idea" was it to make this memoir a film, and how'd you get involved with the project?

William Broyles Jr.: I'd read *Jarhead* the minute it came out and was impressed with its honesty and the way it captured the details of life as a Marine, and—most

of all—by what a remarkable story it was. Doug Wick and Lucy Fisher had been talking with me for some time about doing a project together. Usually, I'd hem and haw, take a while to decide, and finally say no. But, when they called and said they had *Jarhead* and started in with the pitch, I just interrupted and said, "Hey, I'm in. Let's do it."

scr(i)pt: *So, did Red Wagon already have the option on the book, or did they go after it at that point?*

WB: They owned it. They'd already gotten Universal to roll the dice and pick it up. It was very real, right from the beginning.

scr(i)pt: *Did you spend a lot of research time with Anthony Swofford?*

WB: I did. I talked to Tony a lot. He had wonderful material beyond the book, like the notebook he kept from sniper school, which had all this graffiti on the cover, the kind of stuff only a 19-year-old obsessed with violence and testing himself would write. The kind of stuff when you're older you like to forget you ever thought. He had wonderful material from the war, too, just the details of what they did, how they passed the time, the kind of food they ate, and the music they listened to. He'd kept all those details and stories stuffed away in the rucksack of his memory. When he sat down to write, they all just spilled out, and there was a lot that didn't make it into the book. I talked to other Marines, too, and did lots of reading and research, the way I always do.

The other thing Tony and I talked about was one of the truths I'd learned doing *China Beach* and *Apollo 13*. When you make a movie about real people, it's always jarring when they see themselves portrayed on the screen. I told Tony that there was the character called Swoff in the book, there was him, and now there was going to be a character on the screen with his name. That Swoff on the screen wasn't going to be him. It was going to be a character in a movie, played by an actor, and that he better get ready to let go of that whole image of himself. Because, thanks to the magic alchemy



PAGE 28: **Peter Sarsgaard** as Troy, a die-hard member of the elite STA Marine unit. ABOVE: **Jamie Foxx** as Sgt. Sykes and **Jake Gyllenhaal** as Marine Anthony "Swoff" Swofford in *Jarhead*, a film based upon Swofford's memoirs of his experiences in Desert Storm. PHOTOS: Universal Studios.

of movies, once *Jarhead* came out, Swoff was going to belong to the world. It would be Jake Gyllenhaal—which he decided wasn't so bad. Of course, Jake's quite amazing in the film, the kind of actor who makes the lines you write seem natural and right.

scr(i)pt: *Your experiences in Vietnam must have had a huge impact on your writing this film. Do you agree?*

WB: Sure. The shadow of Vietnam hangs over the whole movie. Swoff was conceived when his dad was on R and R from Vietnam. Being the son of a Vietnam vet shaped his whole upbringing. One of the most disturbing scenes in the movie is when the guys find out they're going to war and watch *Apocalypse Now* to get ready. Most people would think of *Apocalypse* as an anti-war movie; but to see these kids go crazy as they watch it, to see them cheer and yell, it's very powerful and very true. It all comes from fear, really. They're about to go off to war for real, and they armor themselves by watching a war movie. We did something of the same thing in Vietnam. We watched all the World War II movies and pretended to be John Wayne.

To me, one of the most profound moments in *Jarhead* is after the war when the Vietnam vet gets on their bus, in the

middle of the victory parade. He's got on his old camies and his medals and has that combat vet's 1,000-yard stare. Swoff in voiceover says, "Every war's different, every war's the same." As a vet, a proud Marine, that always gets to me—the idea of one generation and another. I've got a son in Iraq right now, there for the third time. So, it's kind of like three generations working: Vietnam, Desert Storm and the war now. They feed into each other. The trick is to show that on film, not talk about it. Just let the audience feel it and make their own connections.

It's like that Hemingway short story *Big Two-Hearted River* where the character has clearly just come back from World War I, but it's never mentioned and is such a powerful presence because of that.

That's one of my key rules about screenwriting, by the way: Shut up, take the words out, let the story and the images create their own emotions. I had a long voiceover at the end. One day it just occurred to me, it would be so much better to take it out completely, say the absolute minimum, and get out of the audience's way. Like the ending of *Cast Away* with Tom Hanks at that crossroads in the Panhandle. I hate wrapping things up neatly. War's not like that. Neither's life.



Swoff with his friend and mentor Troy in *Jarhead*, written by William Broyles Jr. (screenplay) and Anthony Swofford (book).

scr(i)pt: *How relevant do you feel this story is today, and do you think there are similarities to the current war in Iraq?*

WB: I have no idea, to be honest. It's relevant to me personally because my son is there, and this present war's eerily and disturbingly becoming more like my own Vietnam experience. Of course, it's strange to be working on a make-believe war when he's over there for real. But again, every war's different, every war's the same. That's one of the last lines Swoff says in the movie. And I believe that. We may see today's war through the prism of Desert Storm, Vietnam or even World War II; but, in the long run, its own reality will emerge, and the men and women who fought in it will tell us what that is.

Our job was to make a true and specific story and not try to make it "relevant." That's how you get heavy-handed and false. Besides, it doesn't work. You don't just want people today to watch it. You want it to be seen years from now and still work. For example, *Lawrence of Arabia* feels much different today in the light of what's going on now than it did 20 or even 10 years ago. That's because it tries to be true to its story and not be relevant to the year it was released. If you're lucky, you get to make something that stands the test of time. We shall see.

What is true—and it's particularly true of the Marines—is that, for better or worse, once you've been through it, you're always part of it. You're in this strange fraternity, often with guys you'd never know what to talk about with otherwise. But, they've been

down that road with you. They're family. There's no such thing as an ex-Marine. Once a Jarhead, always a Jarhead.

By the way, a piece of advice: Don't go calling Marines "Jarheads" unless you're one yourself. It's the kind of name that, if outsiders use it, there tend to be fights in bars afterward.

scr(i)pt: *I was very touched by your script and was actually moved to tears when I read the end of the screenplay. How closely did you adhere to Anthony's novel?*

WB: I tried to stay as close to the spirit of the novel as I could. Tony's book is very literary, which makes it so great as a book. That gave a lot of problems making it as a film since the narrative of the book fractures time. You might be reading about Swoff's life as a teenager, a scene from the war, and a scene long after the war, all within a few pages. It's beautifully written, achingly true vignettes, like a bunch of pearls on a string. The narrative is held together by this powerful, consistent voice. We used some voiceover in the movie to capture that, but we had to reconstruct or, rather, just construct a narrative. In my experience, the better the book, the harder it is to make into a movie. The more it takes advantage of the opportunities for great prose, the more of a challenge to transform it into film.

scr(i)pt: *What did you turn in first?*

WB: My first choice was to do it as three acts: before the war, during the war, after the

war. But even then as I was writing, the act about the war took on a three-act structure and took over the script. Then, when Sam Mendes read it, he immediately said, "The war's the movie." He just knew that right away. So I tossed out the first and last acts, and we figured out how to reduce them to a couple of minutes of very visual storytelling. It's all trial and error. You do this, it doesn't work; you do that.

scr(i)pt: *How many drafts did you have to do?*

WB: A lot. Always more than you expect. The key for me is to read each draft as if someone else wrote it. Act like every draft is a rewrite job on a script by somebody else, and not this wonderful, beautiful creation you yourself made. Don't get attached to the things you love. Stay focused on the story of the movie and what serves it. Don't be easily satisfied. Sam's the same way, so we were always calling each other up with ideas of how to do things better. That process tends to produce a lot of drafts. You just have to trust in the process. Me, I can't leap to the mountaintop. I've got to take every single step.

scr(i)pt: *What advice might you give a writer attempting an adaptation?*

WB: Find the movie in the book; don't try to tell the book. They're so different, books and film, that if you don't conceive the adaptation as a movie from the ground up, you lose the opportunity to be true to the heart of the book. Of course, be lucky to get something as rich as *Jarhead*.

scr(i)pt: *At what point did Universal pick up the film?*

WB: They had a deal with Doug and Lucy, so they had the option on the book together. To their immense credit, Universal believed in this from the beginning and never wavered. That's not always been my experience, to say the least.

scr(i)pt: *How hard was it to get this film greenlit?*

WB: Amazingly easy. I turned it in to Doug and Lucy on a Thursday. They sent it to Sam on Friday, and on Monday we were pretty much a go. *Apollo 13* is the only other movie I ever had go so fast. All the others were like *Pilgrim's Progress*: years of false starts, backing up, falling off the path, despair. *Cast Away* took seven years. I've got some others that have been cooking even longer than that.

scr(i)pt: *Where did they shoot the film, and did you travel to location?*

WB: We shot in California and Mexico. I visited the set once or twice. My view is, if I need to come to the set, I haven't done my job. Sam and I were on the phone all the time, adjusting lines, rethinking scenes, taking advantage of locations, talking through the consequences of how one scene was filmed, what it might mean for the next scene. You know, trying to take advantage of the unexpected, the way a character or a moment might develop differently on film than you expect. I was watching a lot of dailies, and we'd talk about that. It was just a great collaboration, from development through filming and into post-production. He's quite amazing, that Mendes guy.

scr(i)pt: *You mentioned to me earlier that you also did some considerable rewriting during post. Can you speak to that?*

WB: Yes, well, that's typical for me. I wrote the last scene of *Cast Away* two weeks before the movie opened, and we shot it the next day and got it into the movie while the planes were waiting to take the prints to the theaters. *Jarhead's* a little different. It's got some voiceover, so you can tinker with that up to the end without changing the images. A lot of the work was taking voiceover out. One day it seemed like the voiceover at the end, for example, that I loved so much from the beginning, just wasn't working. It was weighing the movie down, reducing complex emotions to simple statements. It was, like, if we'd used a voiceover on the island in *Cast Away*. It would have gotten in the way of what the audience was seeing. My first rule of voiceover is never say what the audience is seeing. You'll only mess it up. So, we took it all out and then did a very minimal few lines, including that one I mentioned earlier: Every war's different, every war's the same.

This was just a lesson for me in the value of the process, of always questioning what you've got, always trying to get it better. Yet again, a lesson in how if you do your filmmaking right, you don't need the words. They may be needed when you write the script, but not needed when you see the movie.

scr(i)pt: *What are you doing next?*

WB: I'm working on a book and on a screenplay for Fox [2000] called *Shadow*

Divers. It's another adaptation. Ridley Scott's signed on to direct. It's a terrific book, beautifully written, and a challenge to transform into a movie because of just how good it is.

scr(i)pt: *China Beach was a very powerful series. Will you ever work in television again?*

WB: It would have to be a cold day in you know where. But some of the best filmmaking, and certainly the best storytelling, is on TV now. So, sure, if the right thing came along.

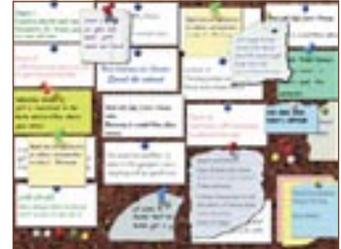
scr(i)pt: *What do you think impacted you most deeply while you worked on this film, and what would you want audiences to take away from it?*

WB: That's a great question. What I said earlier, about *Cast Away*, where we decided not to try to wrap things up neatly, that's how I feel about this film. We didn't want to tie it all up neatly. We didn't want to reference what was going on now or try to put some heavy-handed message in there. It's not pro-war, it's not anti-war. It's just the way it was, as best as we could tell it. It's the story of a group of young men at a particular time. We've done our best to be true to that story, to be faithful and respectful of those young Marines, to bring their experience to an audience. These Marines, like the men and women in Iraq now, their stories don't usually get told. Because of my personal experience, I've got a passion to tell that kind of story. We them in uniform and send them off to war, and that makes them abstractions to most people, guys with gas-masks on, goggles, uniforms, helmets. But, they're not abstractions. They're all different. They're us. (i)

KATE McCALLUM is an independent producer/writer/consultant based in Los Angeles. She has worked as a development executive with Western Sandblast at Paramount TV and most recently in both the production of *Law & Order* and then in development with writer/showrunner Michael Chernuchin at NBC Universal Television. She specializes in transmedia property development and consultation and has several media projects in development under her company Bridge Arts Media: Bridgeartsmedia.com. Additionally, she co-founded c3, The Center for Conscious Creativity, whose mission is to explore the power of art and media's effect on society and culture: Consciouscreativity.org.

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