

THE MOVIE DIRECTOR'S STORY

By John F. Hall

From inside my old house on Dyers Hill Road, or sitting on my front porch swing, I would write stories about things that I have experienced or observed. Many decades ago, I began to experiment converting still pictures into video and adding video and music. I filmed a few weddings as gifts to the bride and groom. My legacy equipment, crude as it was, accomplished what I wanted to do. At that time, I was a Training Officer in the Army Reserve and thought about making a training movie to better train battalion officers and their staff. This true story tells about the time, I went up to the top floor of a clandestine five-story building, to obtain Russian military training films to use in my training movie.



My story begins 39 years ago. The Army Reserve trained its Battalion (BN) Officers using paper messages, mainly in a field environment. I came up with a new training concept to use video to improve the effectiveness of the BN Military Police (MP) Command Post Training Exercise (CPX). I was a member of the Military Police Team of the 100th Division Maneuver Training Command (MTC) stationed at Bowman Field in Louisville, Kentucky, I would continue to use intelligence reports and messages, but I created scenarios that required the officers to respond with actions they would take once they received the reports.

This was in 1985, before video training was available in the Army Reserve. I was given access to the General Electric (GE) video production studio in Louisville, Kentucky. I wrote the script for the actor's portion of the CPX. A GE studio employee, and fellow Reservist, helped me with the editing of the training film used in the new MP BN CPX. I was amazed as I witnessed the technical ability of the GE employee to edit, frame by frame, the VHS footage that I provided. That employee was on his own time. Sitting next to him, I would instruct him on the exact frames, that I wanted to use, or the ones that I wanted him to edit out.

When I first presented my idea for the new MP CPX to my MTC Commander, I told him that to make it realistic; I needed actual Russian film footage. He told me that he later, I received a phone call at home from the MTC Commander. He told me to wear a Class "A" Army dress uniform and drive to Louisville. The Division had booked a commercial flight for me to fly from Louisville to Washington DC. My orders included authorization for a rental car. I was instructed to drive from DC to Charlottesville, Virginia. I was given an address in that city. When I arrived, I found an inconspicuous five-story building. There was no sign in the front or sides of the building. I began to wonder if I was given an incorrect address. I hated to think that I would have to call Division Headquarters for the correct address. I parked the rental car in the parking lot in front of the building. I wondered if the building belonged to the CIA or perhaps, the NSA. I walked inside and was met by several security personnel. They requested to see my orders and my military identification card.

A man came out of an elevator and walked over to me. He shook my hand and said: "Captain Hall, we have been expecting you. Follow me." We went into the elevator and up to the top floor, and into a room with thousands of film canisters. I told the man what I wanted. I reviewed 13 hours of film and I selected one and a half hours to take back with me to the MTC. I asked the man to convert the film to a VHS format. When I was going through the DC airport, to return to Louisville, I requested that the VHS tape, that was in a plastic container, not be X-rayed. I was concerned that it could be damaged by the X-ray machine.

As I was about to board the plane, two security officials at the boarding gate, really looked me over. I was in my Class "A" Army uniform. I don't know if they thought that I was a spy. I looked back at them and stared them down. I remember when my granddaughter, Heather Hall was four years old. When she got angry, and I looked at her, she would say: "Stop eyeing me!" I never claimed that I could stare a bear down, but I could look suspects in the eye, and make them nervous.

A fellow Army Reservist worked for General Electric (GE) in their video production studio. He volunteered to help me with the training project. I was able to show the results of the Battalion Officer's decisions to intelligence reports of enemy activity. If the officer made the correct decision, I would show that Officer and his staff, the enemy being destroyed. If that officer made the wrong decision, I would show what the Russians would do. The first time I used this new training MP BN CPX on a unit, the Commanding Officer made the wrong decision. I stopped the exercise, and I had the Commanding Officer call all of his staff, and all the other soldiers in his Headquarters Company. I put a tape into a VCR and showed the soldiers the results of the wrong decision. You could have a pin drop. The soldiers were amazed and stunned.

I was blessed to have the assistance of Staff Sergeant Al Fugate. He had Russian uniforms and he looked like a Russian. His voice could mimic a Russian speaking poor English. He played the role with believability. I wrote the script, and I directed the training film. The realism in the new MP BN CPX came from the Russian propaganda training films. I used a three-ring note book and white paper. I would draw four squares on each page. I would make sketch drawings, in each box, that represented shots that I wanted to take for the movie portion of the training film. The boxes contained how the story would flow. The note book, was the same as a storyboard. Below each of the sketches, I would verbalize the concept, usually with one or two paragraphs.

Sergeant Al Fugate was a quick study. He would study my storyboard and was able to act the part with just one take. The Reservist at GE let me use an office and Sergeant Fugate played the role of a Russian General. We just provided an antique phone and a Russian emblem to make it look like a Russian General's office. To create a field shot, we set up a tent, camouflage netting, wall maps, and a small field table. Another Captain, on the MP Team, played the role of an American General.

I never considered what I was doing, to make this new training concept, to be work. I was given a "Director's chair" by a member of my family. I presented the new MP BN CPX

training film to the Commanding General of the 100th Division Training. I was later awarded an Army Commendation Medal, for meritorious achievement, for making the new MP BN CPX. The sad reality, today, is that the Russians invaded Ukraine. It's soldiers and hired mercenaries are killing innocent women and children with impunity.

I wrote this story inside my old house on Dyers Hill Road. I feel that my experience, living here for the past 45 years, can best be expressed in a hymn. Bill Burns wrote a hymn called, "The Lord Still Lives In this Old House." His song lyrics share how I feel about my old house. These are his lyrics: "If this earthly tabernacle should be dissolved today, I'd trade it for a finer one that would not pass away. But 'til the day arrives when it's time for moving out, it's such sweet peace to know the Lord still lives in this old house. The sweetest fellowship I've known has fortified these walls. And peace has reigned since He's been won up and down these halls. With snow upon the rooftop now and those hinges near worn out, it's such a joy to know the Lord lives in this old house. To Him it's been a dwelling place where He kept my hand in His. To me a home away from Home is really all it is. It sure ain't fine or fancy, and all I can boast about is after all these years, is that the Lord still lives in this old house. There were times He had the right to up and move away. And there were times it took His amazing Grace to stay. But he never left this old building once, that's why I can sing and shout! 'Cause after all these years the Lord still lives at this old house"

What this hymn is mainly about is each person's soul and their relationship to Jesus Christ. He stays and forgives us no matter how many times we fail and fall. The Good Lord has blessed this old man with so many opportunities to do so many different things. These experiences form the basis for some of my stories. I also believe that Christ gives me the grace and inspiration to write stories. I believe that Christ gives people talent, and if they use it wisely, they are given more talent. I also believe that if they squander it, that Christ will take the talent away. I feel that people have a time-window of opportunity to achieve desired outcomes. It is a short period of time. Once that period is over, the window is closed, and the chance to take the opportunity is no longer possible. This is one reason why I continue to write stories for all of my grandchildren, for my family, for my extended family, for my Christian Fraternity Brothers, for my Church families, and for my dear friends. I'm still a work-in-progress, just giving my stories away. May Christ bless one and all.

John F. Hall

*Read other stories by John F. Hall and others at:

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