

MARTIAL JUSTICE

A screenplay by

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FADE IN:

EXT. PRISON CAMP. NIGHT. (MARCH, 1944)

Sound of crickets. Utter blackness. Then the sweep of a searchlight illuminates and reveals in its path a barren stretch of gravel . . . patches of dirt . . .dull cement blocks of buildings . . .an evil-looking barbed wire fence . . . the trappings of a WWII prison camp. And then the light disappears again as it moves toward the other side of the camp.

In the quiet darkness, a door to one of the buildings slams open, pushed by a man's back. He appears to be dragging something from the building, and is helped in his task by a number of men. As they start to cross the compound, the sound of crunching gravel beneath them indicates that whatever they're dragging, it's not easy. Their whispered, incoherent voices relay instructions to one another.

The whispers turn into grunts when the object in the middle of this dark mass of bodies comes to life, struggling for freedom. The captors jerk with alarm and try without success to restrain their prisoner's wild movements. No details can be seen--everything is movement and sweat and grunting and hissed orders. Blows rain down upon the man in the center of the fight, and brutal kicks make him cry out, but his strength doesn't fail him and he seems unstoppable.

The searchlight appears again, for a second revealing seven men atop an eighth, each younger than the next, each wearing pale gray uniforms. Then it cloaks them in darkness again, and without having hesitated for an instant, the men continue their battle.

One of the kicks lands in the small of the prisoner's back, and this sends him to his knees with a strangled scream of pain. The men close ranks around him.

But another light surprises them--headlights, moving towards them, along with the sound of a truck motor. The seven men freeze, but the eighth still tries to wrench himself loose, to escape from the men surrounding him into the increasing spotlight of the approaching jeep.

For the first time, the men's faces are clearly visible, with the exception of the captive, whose head is bent in effort as he keeps struggling. One of the men, a clean-cut youth, turns his head in the direction of the jeep, then looks back at his comrades.

YOUTH

Shit! Let's go!

As one, the other men scatter, dropping their prisoner. He falls to his hands and knees. Slowly he lifts his bruised head towards the light. He is WERNER DREXLER, 21. His boyish face would be handsome without the blood and sweat and expression of exhausted panic. He can barely breathe, but tries to cry out in a weak voice.

DREXLER

Help! Help me!

The jeep slows. Drexler is in silhouette, on his knees, hands reaching out like a supplicant to the faceless jeep occupants beyond the flood of light.

But the jeep speeds up again, turning away from Drexler to a path to his left.

It keeps rattling on. Behind the jeep, his figure increasingly distant, Drexler tries to crawl after his potential saviors. But the seven men reappear, surrounding him until he's blocked from sight. Soon they, too, are swallowed in darkness as the jeep continues to drive forward.

EXT. PRISON CAMP ENTRANCE. NIGHT.

Now the headlights of the jeep illuminate the barbed wire fence and the guards who stand on either side of the sole gate leading to the outside world.

An armed guard opens the gate, which is not well reinforced or even sturdy, and lets the jeep through. He then slowly pulls it closed.

EXT. OUTSIDE PRISON CAMP. NIGHT.

The gate closes. The searchlight sweeps around, its beam cutting through the fence and landing on a signpost out by the road:

PAPAGO PARK
PRISONER OF WAR CAMP
U.S. ARMY

INT. MILITARY COURTROOM. DAY. (JULY, 1944 -- four months later)

A pretty woman, MISS WHITNEY, in heavy makeup but simple clothes, sits in a witness box. She is looking straight ahead.

MISS WHITNEY

(A light southern accent) I didn't think much of it at the time, no.

A man leans towards her, hand on the witness box, drumming the little barricade with his fingers. He is MAJOR WILLIAM H. TAYLOR, 39, and wears a white JAG uniform but doesn't himself look military. He has a permanent cynical smile etched in his mouth and intelligent eyes hooded by a mask of indifference.

TAYLOR

Didn't think much of it at the time, Miss Whitney?

MISS WHITNEY

I just said I didn't. He was from the base nearby, so I figured he'd be a nice guy.

TAYLOR

You just said he had no identification on him.

MISS WHITNEY

Yes.

TAYLOR

So how did you know he was from the base?
Maybe he had identification after all, isn't
that possible?

MISS WHITNEY

(Wryly) I also said he was naked. I don't
know where he could have hidden it. Do you?

The people in the courtroom, including the jury, laugh.
THE JUDGE bangs his gavel lightly, and things quiet down.

TAYLOR

(Hiding a smile) Let's not speculate.

His eye catches something moving in the back of the
courtroom. The door opens, and a young man in uniform,
DANIEL HALL, slips inside, moving quietly up to the defense
table. The DEFENDANT, a lanky soldier in his mid-twenties,
keeps his nervous gaze on Taylor.

TAYLOR

(Ambling his way back to the defense table)
So, even though he had no identification on
him, you were somehow able to divine that he
was from the army base. Not only that, but
you were able to figure out his name and
rank.

MISS WHITNEY

He told me his name.

TAYLOR

He did? A man who ran through your garden
and flashed you bothered to tell you his
name?

MISS WHITNEY

Yeah, he did.

TAYLOR

This must have been an uncommonly polite
flasher, miss.

Daniel holds out a note to Taylor, who opens it and scans
the lines quickly.

JUDGE

Is there something wrong, Major?

TAYLOR

Uh...no, sir. Your honor, may I request a brief recess?

JUDGE

(Sighing) It's almost lunch.

TAYLOR

(Lifting the paper as if it's come straight from Gen. Eisenhower himself) I've just received some vital information regarding this case, your honor!

JUDGE

All right. Let's break for lunch now. We will reconvene at fourteen hundred hours.

The judge bangs his gavel again, and the BAILIFF by his side stands to attention.

BAILIFF

All rise!

The courtroom crowd obeys, and the judge departs the bench. At once, the defendant lays a hand on Taylor's arm.

DEFENDANT

What is it, sir? Did you find the other guy?

Both Taylor and Daniel ignore the defendant throughout the following rapid interaction.

TAYLOR

You saved my bacon, Danny-boy. Is this for real?

DANIEL

What do you think, I'm gonna make something like this up?

DEFENDANT

Is it good news?

TAYLOR

But why Kansas?

DANIEL

I don't know. All I got is what's on that paper.

DEFENDANT

Major Taylor!

Taylor and Daniel turn to the young man, surprised. They've forgotten he existed.

DEFENDANT

What's going on?

TAYLOR

Sorry, soldier, but you're going to be dealing with Major Dixon from now on. I've got a new case on my hands.

DEFENDANT

What? Are you kidding me?

Taylor folds up his papers and puts them in his briefcase.

TAYLOR

No, afraid not.

DEFENDANT

But we're in the middle of the case! I thought you believed I didn't flash that lady!

TAYLOR

Sure I do, kid, but someone else will have to uncover things, if you'll pardon the expression. I've got my orders.

DEFENDANT

I don't believe this. . .

Taylor snaps his briefcase shut and claps a hand on the defendant's shoulder.

TAYLOR

Look, I'll be back to finish this day's testimony, and we'll talk things over later. Don't worry, Major Dixon'll do you up right, I promise. Go have some lunch, and I'll see you in an hour, okay?

He turns away without waiting for an answer and starts down the aisle. Daniel looks back at the defendant for a second, giving him an awkward apologetic shrug, but then follows his friend out of the courtroom.

The doors swing shut, leaving the defendant standing alone in the empty chamber.

EXT. OUTSIDE FORT LEAVENWORTH. DAY.

Sunlight bathes a jeep and its two occupants as it waits for the military prison gate to open. This gate is a marvel of strength, and unlike Papago Park, it's held up by a massive concrete wall, which gleams a brilliant white in the sun.

Inside the jeep, Taylor drums his impatient fingers on a file at his side. His quirked lips twist when a GUARD approaches.

TAYLOR

There a problem, Private?

GUARD

Sorry for the hold-up, sir. We're waiting for orders from the colonel.

TAYLOR

I've got orders from the colonel. He's the one who wants me here.

GUARD

Yes sir, we just have to confirm that, sir.

TAYLOR

Somehow I thought you'd be more concerned about letting people out of here, not letting 'em in.

The guard looks dully at him. He's heard this before. Ahead, a SECOND GUARD leans out of a guard post.

SECOND GUARD

We just heard from command. Let 'em in, Greene.

The first guard nods at the DRIVER, who jerks the jeep into gear. The guard jogs ahead and opens the gate to let them in. The jeep's wheels roll forward into the compound. Taylor lifts a hand in mock salute as they pass the guards.

EXT. FORT LEAVENWORTH. DAY.

The jeep drives through the compound, a huge model prison of concrete, cement, and military personnel dotting the exterior in perfect uniform spacing. Passing by some of the smaller barracks, Taylor notes the pristine surroundings. He shakes his head.

EXT. FORT LEAVENWORTH HEADQUARTERS. DAY.

Pulling up in front of a well-guarded building, the jeep halts. Taylor starts to open the door, but is beaten to it by a gung-ho soldier who holds it open for him, snapping to salute. Taylor reacts only slightly and then ignores the other man, moving to the entrance.

INT. COLONEL GRACE'S OUTER OFFICE. DAY.

Taylor sits in a sparse waiting room and assistant's station. He glances at the clock on the wall, which reads 3:15. His gaze then moves to the ASSISTANT, a middle-aged woman. He secretly examines her legs, giving a slight smile of appreciation, and then looks up. She is staring at him with the same dull look of boredom that the guard possessed earlier.

The phone on the assistant's desk buzzes.

ASSISTANT

Yes, sir? . . . Very good, sir. (Hangs up phone, her tone sharpening.) You can go in, Major.

Taylor takes his briefcase with him, grinning at her briefly before opening the door.

INT. COLONEL GRACE'S OFFICE. DAY.

COLONEL STANFORD GRACE is at the center of his office, a book-lined library that looks more like a room in an English country home than a prison. GRACE, a genial man in his fifties, steps forward to shake Taylor's hand.

GRACE

Good to see you again, Major.

TAYLOR

You too, Colonel.

GRACE

How long's it been? Two, three years now?

TAYLOR

About that, yeah. I'm surprised you remember me, actually. We didn't talk for that long at the party.

GRACE

Yeah, but I got a lot of mileage out of that joke you told.

TAYLOR

Joke?

GRACE

Involving the nun and Eisenhower--

TAYLOR

Oh yeah, I remember.

They laugh, Taylor somewhat reluctantly. Grace gestures towards a chair.

GRACE

I was able to use that one for ages. I owe you.

TAYLOR

You don't owe me. I got it from an army chaplain, myself.

GRACE

(Laughing) Well, take a seat, Major. Want anything to drink?

Taylor is a little surprised, but can't hide the wary gratitude of a drowning man thrown a lifeline)

TAYLOR

Uh, maybe a scotch?

GRACE

Sure. (He sets about making the drink.) Hope your trip from Phoenix wasn't too taxing.

TAYLOR

Not too bad. It's cooler here than it is there.

Grace hands him the drink and sits down, folding his hands on his desk blotter. He watches Taylor drink for a few seconds. Taylor keeps sipping, either not aware or not caring that he's being examined.

GRACE

So, what do you think of our facility?

TAYLOR

You should be proud. Hell of a setup you have here.

GRACE

Finest in the country.

TAYLOR

At first I thought I was coming into a luxury hotel. You think our boys overseas are getting this kind of hospitality?

GRACE

(Grim) I doubt it.

TAYLOR

Yeah, me too. I don't think Adolf's rolling out the red carpet for his POW's the way we are here.

Grace's pleasant demeanor obviously dims, and he leans back in his chair, putting distance between himself and Taylor.

GRACE

We're not rolling out a red carpet. We're just playing by the rules here.

TAYLOR

Not saying you aren't, but it seems to me that there's no reason to treat these prisoners any better than the Nazis or Japs are treating theirs. From what I hear, they don't give a damn about rulebooks when it comes to torture.

GRACE

(Losing his patience) My son is a prisoner of war right now, Major. I'm well aware of what he could be going through over there.

TAYLOR

(After a pause) I'm sorry to hear that, sir.

GRACE

Yes. Let's get to business. You've had a chance to read through the file we sent you?

TAYLOR

Yes. Um, I have to say I'm not too sure about some things.

GRACE

That's why you're here. To talk this over. You understand the basic premise though, right?

TAYLOR

It's easy enough to grasp. Some Germans killed another German prisoner.

GRACE

They did more than that. They beat him within an inch of his life and then lynched him.

TAYLOR

(Shrugging, conceding Grace's point.) Okay. The part I don't understand is why we're involved at all. Isn't this a matter for their own people back in Europe? Once they return home, why don't we let the Germans deal with 'em?

GRACE

Because they committed the crime on American soil, Major.

TAYLOR

Yes, but it's a time of war. Do we really need to worry about trying these soldiers for killing one of their own kind?

GRACE

There's slightly more to it than that.

TAYLOR

Not according to the file.

GRACE

Obviously, not everything goes into files.

TAYLOR

Granted. But even if there's more to it, what's all this got to do with you? This happened back in Arizona. Why are you dealing with it?

GRACE

Because there are some implications here. The man killed wasn't just another German soldier.

TAYLOR

No? Then who was he?

GRACE

He was--at least, at one point he had been--working for us.

As Taylor takes this in, Grace stands up and moves around the desk. He opens the door and looks out at his assistant.

GRACE

Come with me, Major.