Code language

by John Petrakis in the June 19, 2002 issue

The films John Woo made in Hong Kong were perfectly matched to the interests of young American audiences, filled with blazing guns, macho posturing and bloody climaxes. Not only did Woo do what U.S. studios were looking for, but he did it better than anyone else, especially in *A Better Tomorrow, The Killer* and *Hard-Boiled*. A decade ago, Woo arrived in America with his brand of action and adventure. He began small, working on a Jean-Claude Van Damme project called *Hard Target* before moving up in price (and class) through *Broken Arrow, Face/Off* and *Mission Impossible II,* which made enough money to grant Woo a bit more artistic freedom. He has exercised that freedom to make *Windtalkers*, his first attempt at a war film.

Despite Woo's penchant for battle and violence, his heroes and antiheroes have always tended to be rebels and loners. Woo is a devout Christian, and there must have been something about the themes of friendship, brotherhood and sacrifice in the script by John Rice and Joe Batteer that appealed to him.

The story takes place in 1944, during the war in the Pacific, and deals with a group of Navajo Indians who volunteer to become "code talkers" for the U.S. Marines. Since the Japanese have been breaking U.S. codes, the decision is made to use a variation on the Navajo language--a language the Japanese know nothing about--as the basis for a new code.

To protect the code talkers, each Navajo is assigned a "bodyguard," someone to protect him during battle. But these bodyguards are also assigned the role of potential executioner, since their main mission is to protect the code at all costs, even if that means killing the code talker if he might be taken prisoner and tortured for information.

To make the story more dramatic (not to mention unrealistic), one of the assigned bodyguards is Sergeant Joe Enders (Nicolas Cage), an emotional basket case who has just suffered through a traumatic slaughter on the Solomon Islands, where every man under his command was killed when he decided to follow ill-advised orders to the letter. Curiously, this incident qualifies him for his new mission: it shows he

understands how to follow commands.

The tale, which is loosely based on fact, unfolds in a most predictable way. The two code talkers, Ben Yahzee (Adam Beach) and Charlie Whitehorse (Roger Willie), are thrust into the established unit where they encounter the mistrust, racism and every other problem that outsiders (blacks, Latinos, Asians) typically face in World War II movies. And sure enough, after a few rocky stretches and bumps in the road, the Native Americans prove their moxie and patriotism by being brave, heroic and willing to kill on command.

The film was clearly designed to be a tale about the code talkers themselves, following their journey from the reservation to the battlefield, a story potentially rich with ethical dilemmas and moral conundrums. For instance, why should these young Navajo men risk their lives for a military that not so many years earlier forced the Navajos off their land and onto reservations? Why would they be sympathetic to a group who all but practiced genocide on their ancestors? What do the tribal leaders have to say? And how does the internal battle between being a Navajo and being an American play out?

Windtalkers ignores these intriguing questions and instead, in true Hollywood fashion, focuses on the one character we have seen plenty of times before, the one character that we don't really want to know more about--that's right, the white sergeant, who is seeking redemption for his previous sin by going into battle anew.

Zeroing in on Sergeant Enders, the film offers all sorts of hazy flashbacks, tight-lipped encounters, and close-ups of his shaking hands and quivering lips before he reloads and wipes out a few dozen enemy soldiers. More than half of *Windtalkers* is battle footage, with Woo delivering his trademark gore. Yes, the scenes are well choreographed, and, yes, they are bloody. And to Woo's credit, they are presented with a certain flair, as befits his hard-earned reputation.

But by the end one feels that Woo has betrayed the promise of the film's opening sequences, in which magnificent shots of Monument Valley conjure up memories of the great John Ford, while the lyrical score by James Homer reminds us of the stirring American music of Aaron Copland. Somewhere deep inside *Windtalkers* is a tale of ultimate forgiveness, as Navajo warriors come to the rescue of their former oppressors. But that story is buried under an avalanche of firepower and a tired star-vehicle about a haggard old soldier.