

SMOKING WITH ERNIE

Twelve O'Clock High Offers Leadership Insight

By Major Curt E. Lafond, CAP

Motoring through the English countryside in the early days of World War II, a general's staff car unexpectedly stops, pulls over to the side of the road, and within yards of the main gate of an air base, the general climbs out of the car. Brigadier General Frank Savage, played by Gregory Peck, lights up a cigarette and takes a good look at what literally and figuratively lies right down the road before him.

The film *Twelve O'Clock High* is filled with scenes crammed with lessons in the art of leadership. The smoking scene, mundane at first glance, is the most important in the film and offers the only advice any leader ever really needs to know: leadership is lonely, and a good leader assumes it deliberately.

The general is about to assume command of the 918th Bomb Group. It is a "hard luck" group with a poor record. Savage has been tasked with making the group healthy again, although he has already held a group command and has seen his fair share of action. With that much background, one can empathize with Savage. What will he do to revive a sagging unit? What will it take to build leadership and confidence? What exactly is a "maximum effort" and how long will Savage remain committed to that goal? Those questions remain open for the viewer's personal consideration throughout the film. Anyone remotely interested in the art of leadership should love this film and can learn from it.

The main gate, just down the road and barely visible, confronts Savage (and after twenty viewings, I think it taunts him more each time). He takes a few puffs of his cigarette, some deep breaths of fresh air, and readies himself for command. One can get the feeling that Savage is using these few moments as his last bit of freedom. In fact, they are the only moments the general will have to simply be "Frank" for a long while. Frank leans over to the driver, "Smoke, Ernie?" He takes a few more drags himself, then abruptly extinguishes the cigarette and orders, "All right, sergeant."

The smoking lamp is out. General Savage has assumed command.

Studying the Art

How can the art and philosophy of leadership be studied and learned? As a cadet, I often watched movies like *Twelve O'Clock High*, and tried to figure out what leadership is all about under the tutelage of professors John Wayne, George C Scott, Clark Gable, and of course Gregory Peck. *Twelve O'Clock High* is a wonderful vehicle to study leadership in action, with the advantage of second-guessing the players' solutions to perceived conflicts. Squadron Officer School at Maxwell AFB has incorporated a study of the film into their curricula. As a special attachment to this article, a similar lesson outline which I developed as a cadet is included.

If the scene where Frank enjoys a smoke with Ernie foreshadows the central theme of the film, that leadership is a personal and lonely effort, what follows next should not be surprising. BGen Savage begins by chewing out everyone in sight for not saluting, being out

of uniform, and a host of other infractions. Proceeding right along, he fires his staff and even places one under arrest for "running out on his duty." The base pub is closed, more training missions are announced, and quickly the 918th realizes they are under a pretty "iron tailed" general.

Certainly Twelve O'Clock High proves to be an entertaining movie, but why is it relevant to CAP officers? After all, CAP is not in a combat environment, and a commander who gives harsh reprimands and humiliates his staff will be unsuccessful in CAP. Although the particulars of Savage's situation differ from what is found in the ordinary CAP squadron, the CAP commander should aspire to imitate Savage's commitment and integrity.

Savage freely chose to be iron-tailed. A war was raging, and there were not many other options. What I admire most about Frank is his intrinsic purposefulness. He is "service above self" personified. Frank agreed to do a job, and then proceeded to do it without counting the cost to himself. As the film progresses, BGen Savage becomes extremely unpopular and his men attempt to transfer out of the 918th en masse. His men did not think of BGen Savage as flesh and blood, but neither does the film portray him as a stereotypical wrathful commander. Savage is alive and real, and the film is loosely based on the life of a real commander, Col Frank Armstrong. He tries to hide the fact he loathes being despised by his men. He desperately wants to be able to play cards with the boys after retreat. Later, he is visibly shaken when a coup fails and he retains command. Frank does not enjoy the prospect of lighting up another cigarette on Calvary. Here, Maj Stovill, a chorus-like adjutant instructs the staff that the only difference between BGen Savage and his predecessor, a mothering, best friend to all type of officer, is that "Savage is about [an inch] taller. "

No, the lesson for CAP officers is not how to be iron tailed like that S.O.B. Frank Savage. Instead the lesson is to show the same commitment to doing one's duty as Frank did. As officers, we should ask ourselves if it is more common to wail and grind teeth when faced with a difficult assignment, or if we should take up smoking with Ernie, and enjoy a quiet moment before casting ourselves into our given job whatever it is - and then proceed to fulfill those responsibilities without complaint.

Unexpected Help

Frank was not alone in his fight to make the 918th a healthy unit. Quickly, the group adjutant, Maj Harvey Stovill, came to the general's assistance. With talk of a mass transfer, Harvey agreed to sit on the paperwork to help buy time for the general.

I like Harvey. He represents the average, ordinary officer among us who might not have the talent of a slugger like Frank Savage, but was still willing to step up to the plate and make a base hit. For every CAP leader who hesitates to act and truly lead, who can say there are not a hundred Harvey Stovills unexpectedly waiting to step forward and follow some one else's lead? Isn't the mere prospect of a Harvey enough to motivate a commander to begin to lead?

Savage relied on Stovill to buttress his efforts, but the two have violently different personalities. Savage is flesh and blood as I have already said, but because he is at work as the commander seven days a week, he was easily perceived as a flat, dictatorial officer by his men. Stovill in contrast is warm and friendly: offering coffee to Savage and going out of his

way to screen the personal effects of boys who "got it" before shipping them home (maybe a lot like Frank if he didn't have to wear a star).

There must have been a reason for Savage to choose Stovill as his co-conspirator, and it probably involved Stovill's diligence and small initiatives. The other officers Savage surrounded himself with were equally professional, but since he had already fired the previous staff, they were not the "A" team. Nevertheless, each accepted Savage's challenge and rose to meet his high standards. CAP leaders might consider there could be a wealth of untapped talent among our quieter members whose only fault is not being part of the clique.

Smoking with Kierkegaard

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard argued that religion requires a "leap of faith." Perhaps leadership is no different. Some one daring must deliberately assume Command, despite the fear of failure, unpopularity, and all that which accompanies one who marches in the front rank before people like Harvey begin to follow. That is how the 918th was made. It is quite simple really, as Savage himself said, "It's the commander, after all it's his job isn't it?" I see no difference for CAP.