

# Twelve O'Clock High

By Luisa F. Ribeiro

In early 1942, with Nazi Germany's successful occupation of much of Europe and "blitzkrieg" war against England, the U.S. Army Air Force was the only American military presence in Europe. Determined to take the war to Germany, the U.S. joined their British cousins in an air campaign to bomb industrial and strategic targets across occupied France and Germany itself. Almost immediately the phrase "maximum effort," the order to go all-out with every airman and plane available, began to assume grim proportions. Dismay over high casualties and questions about the raids' actual military value arose, leaving the campaign controversial which it remains to the present day. In a dramatic rendering of the early days of American strategic bombing, the riveting film "Twelve O'Clock High" (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1949) demands to know what constitutes a "maximum effort" and whether grinding up men to find out is the best way to win a war.

By the end of 1943, U.S. movie audiences were exhausted with war movies, no matter how stirring or patriotic. After enduring two long grueling years of war in Europe and across the Pacific, American movie-goers found the flag-waving "rah-rah" sentiments of cinematic war were wearing a little thin and increasingly disconnected from their own reality. Despite the enormous success of director William Wyler's post-war "The Best Years of Our Lives" (Goldwyn-United Artists, 1946), popular Hollywood films from 1945 to 1949 decidedly stayed away from war themes.

During those same years, filmmakers nevertheless had the darker side of war and numerous other thorny topics on their drawing boards. Buoyed by the overall artistic shift toward realism brought on by war, seismic transitions within the motion picture industry and changing audience expectations, Hollywood producers took up jolting "social conscious" films like "Crossfire" (1947), "Gentleman's Agreement" (1948), both centering on anti-Semitism; "The Snake Pit" (1948), about mental illness; and "Pinky" (1949), an exploration of race. The success of these movies convinced filmmakers that the time was right to give the recent war serious examination free from propaganda and sentiment. "Command Decision" and "Battleground" (1948 and 1949 respectively) led the way.

In 1947 at Twentieth Century-Fox, studio head Darryl F. Zanuck read the galleys for the novel "Twelve O'Clock High" by Army Air Force veteran



Gregory Peck as Brigadier General Frank Savage.  
Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

Beirne Lay, Jr. (who had written the novel and screenplay for "I Wanted Wings," Paramount, 1941) and screenwriter Sy Bartlett. Impressed by the novel's gritty depiction of the challenges of leadership and unflinching questioning of America's daylight precision bombing campaign, Zanuck purchased the novel after receiving legal clearances from publishers Harper & Row on the any semblances to the William Wister Haines novel "Command Decision," on which the play and M-G-M film were based.

Production on "Command Decision" hung over the development of "Twelve O'Clock High"'s screenplay, penned by Lay, Jr. and Bartlett. Producer Louis D. Lighton was initially assigned the project and intended William "Wild Bill" Wellman to direct. Script difficulties continued to delay production and in early 1949 Lighton went on to another film and Zanuck took over as producer. Uneasy with the story's similarity to "Command Decision," Zanuck excised the entire opening and punched up the differences from the stagey, set-bound "Command Decision." Zanuck's tweaks included placing action on airfields and on a pivotal mission which used actual air combat footage (whereas "Command Decision" never leaves the ground, its missions occurring off-screen).

Once Zanuck had his script, he received approval from the U.S. Air Force and secured his leading man, Gregory Peck, and director, Henry King. Other actors and directors had previously rejected the original script as being too familiar and Peck too had expressed reservations with the original script, but was enthused with the revisions despite his appearing in nearly every scene.

The late 1940s saw Peck's career kicking into high gear, after a strong start with "The Keys of the Kingdom" (1944) and a variety of rich roles distinguished by the actor's nuanced blend of passion and stoic pragmatism, including Alfred Hitchcock's "Spellbound" (1945), "The Yearling" (1946) and "Gentleman's Agreement." By 1948, Peck was more than ready to tackle the role of Brigadier General Frank Savage, a man tasked with inspiring and leading men into an uncertain, possibly deadly future. Peck topped an outstanding cast of actors who brought a necessary humanity and credibility to their roles: Gary Merrill as Col. Keith Davenport, the much loved 918<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group head that Peck's Savage must replace; Dean Jagger as Savage's sage ground executive, Maj. Harvey Stowall; Hugh Marlowe as the luckless Lt. Col. Ben Gately who comes under Savage's merciless glare; and Millard Mitchell as the grim "Old Man," Gen. Pritchard. Another of Zanuck's script cuts had been the removal of any significant female roles, leaving only a single nurse with a small speaking part. The story never lacks for fierce emotion, however, first as Davenport battles for his "boys;" then as Harvey come to re-spect Savage and provide him unstinting support; and, finally, as Frank lays himself on the line to turn the "boys" into men.

The film opens with a brief framing story set in England where a vacationing Harvey revisits Archbury field where he was once stationed. Walking across the abandoned field, Harvey recalls the crucial early days of the war. The drone of B-17 bomb-

ers overhead is followed by a breathtaking crash landing (staged by famed stunt pilot Paul Mantz) as ambulances and a staff car race silently across the field toward the ailing plane. King set the film's entire mood with this grim opening sequence and keeps the tension mounting by allowing many scenes to play out with minimal inserts and cutting, highlighting the blunt, often startling dialog ("What do I do with an arm, sir?" "An arm? Whose arm?").

Despite the fact that Peck got along quite well with King during filming, the dedicated actor harbored doubts about how well he was carrying the picture. In private correspondence to Zanuck sent just before the film wrapped, Peck listed nine key scenes that he felt he could improve upon. Zanuck responded immediately with a point-by-point reply detailing why each scene was exactly right. There were no reshoots and the film went on to critical and popular acclaim.

While frankly portraying the doubts and concerns of young airmen and their commanding officers during a war that is far from being won, "Twelve O'Clock High" remains fresh and vital primarily because it refrains from cynicism or falseness. With unblinking accuracy, the film conveys a "maximum effort," avoiding the pitfalls of smug heroics or simplistic platitudes, leaving the bitter complexity of the true cost of war.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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