



(Right) Where it all began. Mr. Harvey Stovall (Dean Jagger), late of the law firm of Stovall and Stokes, comes upon the Archbury Toby in the street window of a Burlington Arcade shop in Post-World War Two, London.

(Top right) General Savage (Gregory Peck) poses with the flight crews of his 918th Bomb Group. As the film's Director, Henry King, brought less than two dozen actors from Hollywood, the bulk of man power used in these Briefing Room scenes were actually Air Force personnel currently assigned to the Eglin Reservation in Florida where the set was constructed. It was the only structure to survive the filming schedule.

(Top left) Indeed a rare sight in this day and age! Eleven of the twelve Flying Fortresses used in the film are captured here breaking into the landing pattern over Ozark AAF in Alabama during April of 1949. The group was led in the air by the film's technical adviser, Col. John deRussy, USAF. The occasion for the filming of these sequences was perhaps the last time so large a formation of American B-17's would ever be seen airborne over their native soil.

As Bernie Lay, Jr., the film's co-author, explains it the name of Savage's famous Fortress, the "Piccadilly Lily" (below) "was a sentimental liberty on my part. I flew several missions with the 'Bloody 100th Hard Luck Group' and had flown in the "Picadilly Lily", a B-17F, on the Ragensburg mission (August 17, 1943) as a special observer and co-pilot."

(Opposite top) Assistant Camerman Lee "Red" Crawford (left) and deRussy between takes at Eglin No. 3. Sixteen years later Crawford and Paul Mantz would end their Hollywood careers on the same film — FLIGHT OF THE PHOENIX. John H. deRussy collection.

(Opposite page bottom) Actor Gregory Peck's portrayal of Army Air Force General Frank Savage won him a best actor nomination by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in 1949. Peck's characterization closely paralleled that of the late Eighth Air Force General Frank A. Armstrong.



*Now, on its 25th anniversary
the inside story of the making of
one of Hollywood's all-time
aviation film classics, told, for
the first time, by the men who
made it.*

THE MAKING OF

12 O'CLOCK HIGH!

By JAMES H. FARMER



Begun shortly after the close of the Second World War, as a labor of love, perhaps as all truly important writing efforts must, the novel, from which the film later evolved, was the creation of two discharged Eighth Air Force Officers with a mission. Col. Beirne Lay, Jr. and Lt. Col. Sy Bartlett had both been witness and party to one of the most momentous and critical times in this Nation's recent history. To the men, their friends, and to one combat commander in particular whose sacrifice can never truly be measured, they wanted to pay tribute. Begun as a weekend and "after-hours" project, their efforts were, in due course, transformed into a series of much belabored film scripts which came very close to being rejected completely by the studio's production head. Retrieved from an oblivious ending by a director whose early personal exploits in the field of aviation are legend, the film would be completed a few short months before the spiritual close of the era for which it spoke.

Nominated in 1950 for four Academy Awards, among those best picture of the year, the film TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH is a sharper, more refined vision of the popular 1948 novel of the same name. Going before the cameras, as it did, during the Spring

and early Summer of 1949 the film offered a fresh second look, an all too brief retrospective, of one of history's most tragic events, on the eve of yet another war in Korea.

Like two other aviation films released within the previous year, COMMAND DECISION and TASK FORCE, TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH reflected a new concern for the trails of command -- a response, so believes one film historian, to America's elevated post-war role in the world and the new mental stresses brought about by the advent of the Cold War. One English observer has simply suggested, however, that such post-war films merely reflect what he prefers to call the excesses of our "American superiority complex" command to the period.

TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH will be the first of a long line of command-oriented films to explore the very real price even the bravest of men must at times pay. Absent, however, is much of the bitterness and the irony that was to pervade the post-1950 war films which, while perhaps quite appropriate for the Korean War gender of film, tended to impose an entirely new outlook upon a period whose moods and attitudes were already sealed within the past.

Therein lies much of what may be said to be the film's historical worth. For TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH was written soon enough after the war by two former Eighth Air Force officers who had "been there" and who now, free of war-time restrictions, sought to put down on paper a factually based personal recollection of one of life's most "unforgettable experiences".

Though the story is admittedly nostalgic "with the agony and heroism carefully ordered by the passage of time", the film does capture, as does no other later effort about the Eighth Air Force,

that highly perishable, transitory feeling for a specific moment in history. Whether the values implied in this film are considered valid today is not important, but rather that these values and inflections be true to the times that produced them.

Here we feel the film must be judged an outstanding success. Evidence of this historical veracity is to be found visually throughout the film and is the result in large part of a studio production staff made up of key personnel who were themselves veterans of the Eighth Air Force. The careful blending of dramatic excellence with technical authenticity can directly be attributed to a veteran director/aviator who was thoroughly conversant with the demands of the script.¹ But perhaps the most important ingredient contributing to the film's critical and popular success is a very unique writer who had earlier played a very important part in the initial formation of the organization whose make-up is at the heart of the story. It is a story which is impassionately based on a rock-solid foundation of historical fact.

Combining all of these elements with a fortuitous timing, at the close of the post-World War II period, would make of *TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH* an aviation film classic — one of the most important aviation films of its time.

THE BEGINNINGS

The origins of this award-winning film can be traced back directly to the agile mind of Hollywood screen writer Sy Bartlett.¹ As a Major in the U.S. Army Air Forces during World War II, Bartlett had struck up a great friendship with Colonel Frank A. Armstrong, Jr., commander of the first Eighth Air Force bomber group to be based in England. On the 17th of August, 1942 Armstrong had led this group, the 97th to the Rouen-Scottville marshalling yards near the French coast on what was to be the first American bombardment strike of the war on Nazi-occupied Europe. Later, on the 4th of January, 1943 he was sent to Thurleigh to take command and "shape up"² the battle-weary 306th Bomb Group(H). Less than four weeks later Frank Armstrong led the first American raid over Germany. The target, their secondary, was Wilhelmshaven. The five Eighth Air Force groups were led by the rejuvenated 306th.

So impressed had Bartlett been with this outstanding group commander and the events which had transpired at Thurleigh during January of 1943 that he felt it simply had to be put on paper, as a novel, at the earliest opportunity. Shortly after the war he contacted Beirne Lay, Jr. Lay had himself been a B-24 group commander³ with the Eighth during the war and was an accomplished writer in his own right. His highly popular book, *I WANTED WINGS*, had earlier been made into a successful film at Paramount Studios in 1941.

"I had no concept of writing any novel about a bomb group in the Eighth Air Force," Lay commented. "All of this impetus came from Sy Bartlett. After the war he started bugging me about writing a book, not only a composite of all of our bomb groups but particularly to portray this character which we called fictionally General Frank Savage." The characterization of Savage closely parallels that of the aforementioned Frank Armstrong, to whom the original book is also dedicated.

"There wouldn't have been any book and no screenplay except for Sy Bartlett. He put me on the rack, forced me to write it. Right after the war I said, 'Sy, we don't have a chance with a book about the war; everybody's sick of war'. But he was bound and determined that he was going to get this thing done."⁴

At the time, Bartlett was working as a full-time screen writer at Twentieth-Century Fox during the day; so, he and Lay soon began spending their evenings together "mapping out" the book.

Lay continues: "In his (Bartlett's) afterhours he worked with me on the book; so, I was the guy who sat down and hammered it out on paper. But every bit of the way it was a collaboration because every night we would review all the material. He was throwing in his ideas, and maybe I would rewrite everything I had written the day before. So, it was a complete collaboration, and Sy Bartlett has to have the credit for having thought of doing the novel in the first place."

Author: "What overlying facts, events, or characterizations from your personal experience with the Eighth Air Force did you and Bartlett want to get across in your book? You've already mentioned Frank Armstrong?"

"Yes, that's part of it. The other part is that for me, and I was a bomb group commander later in the war, it was an unforgettable experience. I just didn't want people to ever forget what some American boys and old men like me, at 34, went through."

Author: "Was the title of your effort, *TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH*, very hard to decide upon?"

"We had a terrible time trying to think of a title. I remember one night at Sy Bartlett's home when we were working on the third chapter and we still didn't have a title. I said, 'Sy, why don't we use a phrase that was most characteristic of the tactics used at the time?' At first the German fighters attacked us from the rear and having a bad time because our rear turrets were pretty good and they were also exposed to the ball turret and top turret, whereas with a head-on attack all they had was the nose guns. And so they quickly got around to attacking head-on which was *TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH*. So Sy's wife, Ellen Drew, who was a movie star at the time, happened to be listening in on us, and she said, 'I think that's a wonderful title.' So we said (without enthusiasm) 'if you say so' — and that's how we got our title."

Author: "But do you remember any of the other titles thrown out for consideration?"

"*MAXIMUM EFFORT* was another. It wouldn't have been too bad, I don't think. We used the term several times in the book."

Author: "According to many printed sources, Fox production chief, Darryl F. Zanuck was immediately impressed with your book. Did he originally want you and Bartlett to do the screen adaptation? Did he make any personal suggestions which left a visible imprint on the film?"⁵

"Well, let me answer this very bluntly. This guy had nothing to do with the picture except to take credit as the producer. The man who wanted to make the picture was a producer at Fox named Louis D. "Bud" Lighton who had made wonderful pictures at MGM and for David Selznick before he came over to Fox. He wanted to make this picture. They paid an awful lot of money for it. I will give it to Zanuck that he went along in buying the motion picture rights on the basis of a brief synopsis. Bud Lighton, however, was the producer all the way through.⁶ He had as much to do with the screenplay as the two guys (Lay and Bartlett) who were supposed to be writing it, who had already written the book.

"You would have thought it would be a breeze to write the screenplay when you had written the book—not so. Bud Lighton, every inch of the way, made us justify and rejustify everything that went into it. He made us define our central idea. Here Bartlett and I had written a whole novel, and we never adequately answered that question, as we found out, when Bud Lighton asked us: 'What was our central idea?' And we each gave him our answers and he said: 'Well, C . . . fellows, you're going all over the place here.' He said, 'Give me something you can put down in a paragraph, or preferably in a line, or even four words.' He said: 'You go back to your office and don't come back here until you can tell me what the central idea is.'"



(Above left) Mr. Beirne Lay Jr., co-author of the original *TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH* novel and the film script, was also one of the most prolific aviation screen writers of the post-World War Two period. Photo: Beirne Lay Jr.

(Above Right) The late Col. Frank Armstrong after whom the character of General Frank Savage was fashioned. It is the Armstrong ordeal with the demoralized 306th Bomb Group during January of 1943 that is the basis for the film. While Armstrong is at the heart of the character, Lay adds that his fictitious General Savage is really a composite made up of a number of historical personages, including Frank Armstrong, Frederick Castle, Ira Eaker, Curtis LeMay and "maybe one or three others." Photo, courtesy Roger Freeman.

"Well, Sy and I took nearly two weeks. We did get it down to four words, and the four words were: *THE DISINTEGRATION OF SAVAGE*. He said: "You've got it! Now I don't want one inch of film that does not contribute to telling that central idea." He said, "I know what you mean. The key word is disintegration. You're going to tell a story of what are the forces that could tear a strong man apart." He said, "We know what they were. On the one hand, he was a very humane, warm-hearted, civil kind of a guy, and he is saddled with the job and obligation of sending -- the dirty, bloody job of sending -- nice, young kids out to get killed", and he said: "the tension between those two forces tore him apart". He said, "You've got it, now go ahead and write your screenplay".

"When we got all through, Zanuck read the screenplay and decided that maybe it might be a winner. How he got rid of Lighton, I don't know, but Lighton was released from the studio and retired on some island off Italy. He died shortly afterward, partly of a broken heart, I think."

Author: "How old was Lighton at the time?"

"Well, he was no longer a young man. I suppose he was 60. It became a Darryl F. Zanuck production and Lighton's name didn't even appear on the screen.

"Now I will say that Zanuck, after he did take this thing over and took personal charge of it, definitely made a contribution in condensing it. We were way over length. Bud Lighton had a tendency to be verbose in the dialogue. I think in fairness to Zanuck he did condense it and tighten it up."

Author: "Did you have much pressure from the front office to keep the character of Pamela (Savage's love interest in the novel) in the final film script, perhaps for reasons of audience appeal?"

"On the contrary, we were 40 pages over length, and she took 40 pages, so she came out. She was a good character and it broke our hearts to take it out, but (with) 40 pages -- what can you do?"

Author: "How did the idea for the now classic opening moments of this movie come about?"

"I think if Sy Bartlett were sitting here he would say that he would have to give me credit for the opening. The idea of going back to an abandoned runway with the grass growing through it . . ."

Author: "Did you or Bartlett ever actually visit such a base after the war?"

"No. Well, later on, we both did, but not at the time we wrote the book. You see, we wrote the book right after the war, within a year or two. But some time later I did. But before this I happened to read in *AIR FORCE MAGAZINE* about some guy that went back to his old runway, and that's where I got the idea.

But we had quite a bit of trouble keeping that in, particularly when our screenplay was overlength. Sy and I both argued that you have to set the stage. You had to set an emotional feeling so when the audience watched this old fud go back to that runway and when you saw that he was deeply moved it would say to them 'I saw something here'. It'll make the audience feel that 'I want to see what he saw that happened here which moved this man so much'. And we closed the same way so it made a frame for the picture. You came in (from that point of reference) and came out (again) with that (at the end)."⁴

With a draft of the script in hand, indeed with three different drafts in hand,⁷ the energetic Twentieth-Century Fox Production Head, Darryl F. Zanuck, took over firm control of the production. Zanuck now tried to consolidate the much belabored drafts into a more concise whole. After considerable effort and "tiring" of the chore, Zanuck called in director Henry King. King, a 35-year veteran in the industry, had only recently returned from a six-month stay in Italy, there directing *THE PRINCE OF FOXES*. Zanuck asked King to read the script. He told the veteran director: "I'm getting tired of it. Take it if you want it -- otherwise, I'll drop it".

Zanuck had chosen his counsel wisely. Long recognized as the "father of (film) locations", Henry King has pioneered the use of aviation within the film industry as a means of speeding up production. In 1921 King had become the first director to go to the exact locale of a story, *TAL' ABLE DAVID*. He is also the first director to take a film company on location to a foreign land, as well as the first to seek out locations by plane. An accomplished pilot in his own right, by 1949 King has amassed nearly a million air miles over a twenty-eight year span."

Despite its many flaws, King liked the script immediately. After scouting locations for the film, Sy Bartlett joined King at the "Bacon's-By-The-Sea" hotel in Florida where the two labored on a final draft of the script. Their efforts centered primarily upon a deletion or curtailment of over-length dialogue which hindered the story's movement and pace. Zanuck had earlier wisely cut out a number of air battle scenes in the script, limiting the film to one climactic air battle near its conclusion. Upon completion of the effort during the storm-filled early morning hours of their seventh day in Florida, King flew the finished script back to California. After reading it, Zanuck offered his congratulations and concluded by saying: "Henry, this is the best script I've ever read". It was a statement, King remembers, Zanuck used on more than one occasion when he was particularly pleased with a script.

Though Lay was already working on another film, *ABOVE AND BEYOND*, at MGM and no longer played an active role in the production of *TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH*, this writer asked the co-author for his opinion of King's contribution to the final product. Lay continues: "I think one thing that helped this picture very much was the fact that one of the writers was a pilot and



had been a bomb group commander during the War and wasn't dreaming anything up and that the director thoroughly understood every bit of it from an aviation standpoint as a pilot, and Henry King is an excellent pilot; I've flown with him many times."⁴

THE PRE-PRODUCTION PLANNING

At the time King took over the picture the former P-38 field at Santa Maria, California was under consideration as a possible location site for the film. He, however, "immediately eliminated" this locale "as being unsuitable to represent England." Lighton had envisioned a more modest production which would have been filmed, for the most part, on a Fox sound stage using exterior process projections of the Santa Maria Airfield as background. Though this would have saved the expense of an extended stay for the cast and crew on location, it clearly was not King's way of making a motion picture. Zanuck concurred and told King to go ahead and do the film "as you want it and where you want it".

In February of 1949 King phoned the film's newly assigned technical adviser, Col. John H. deRussy, at Maxwell AFB in Alabama.⁹ During World War II deRussy had been Operations Officer of the Eighth Air Force's 305th Bomb Group in England.

"King called" deRussy continues, "and asked if I had any thoughts on a stateside location similar to Midlands bases in England. I suggested McGuire AFB in New Jersey. A few days later he flew there from Los Angeles¹⁰ and I flew in from Maxwell Field, Alabama. Henry King is an audacious pilot and holder of one of the earliest private pilot licenses issued in the U.S. The flight he made from L.A. to McGuire in his Bonanza 35 was, as

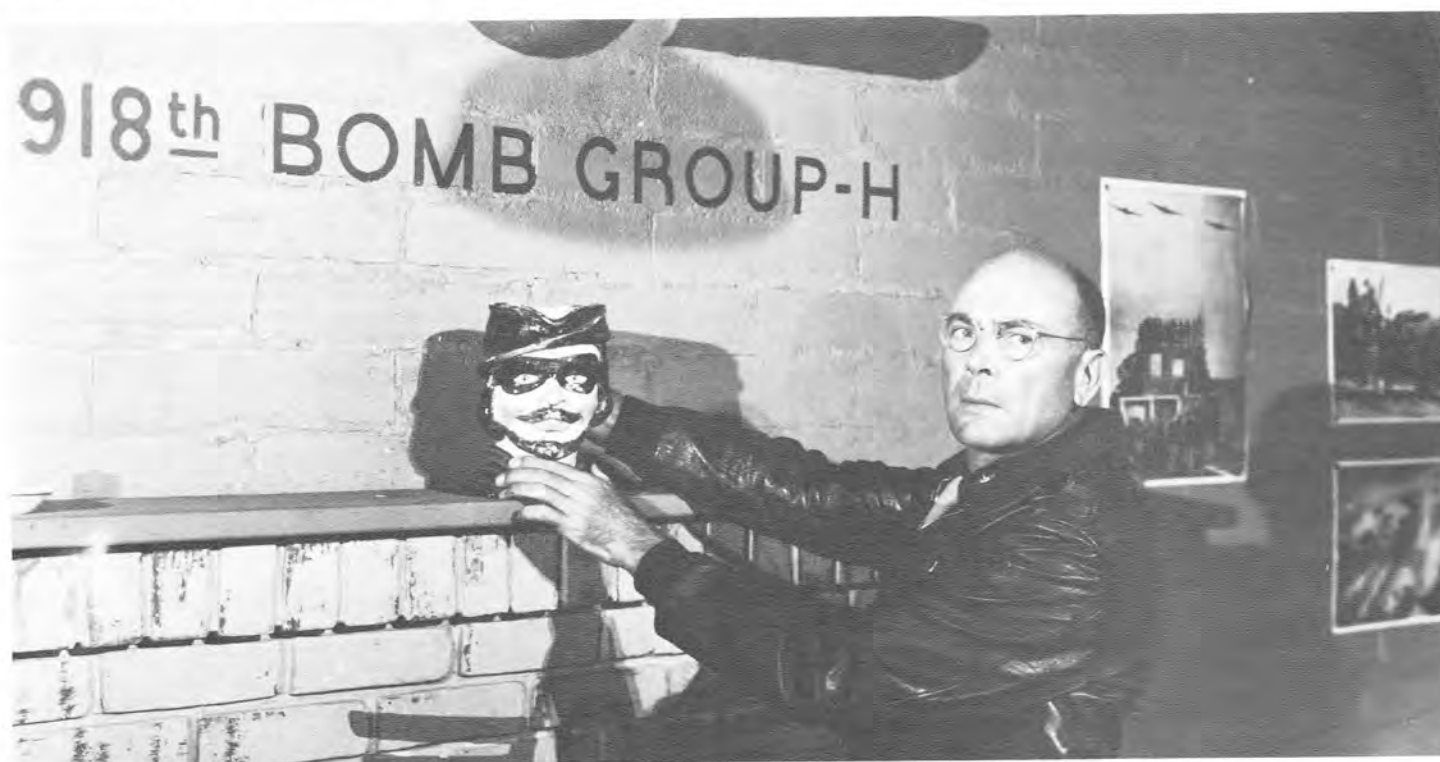
told to me by the three passengers he carried, an epic in endurance. He completely exhausted his much younger passengers."¹¹

Among these three harried passengers were King's cameraman, Leon Shamroy, and John W. Adams, the film's locations manager. While in the Washington D.C. area, King and Adams had gone to Air Force Headquarters to discuss possible shooting sites and determine the availability of aircraft and crews.

IN POINT OF FACT

The Group (above) upon which the authors' based their novel and later film script. The 306th also had the distinction of being the oldest operational Bomb Group in the Eighth Air Force. Official USAF via Bruce Orriss

Scene 25 (left top opposite page) takes place early on in the film in the base interrogation room following the earlier belly-landing of the crippled B-17 by the plane's co-pilot, Lt. Bishop. Here Lt. Wilson (Don Hicks), the plane's navigator, intercedes for a dazed Lt. Bishop (Bob Patten) as the interrogation officer (Roger Anderson) attempts to proceed with the de-briefing. The circumstances of the mission related in this and the earlier exterior scene are based on the July 26, 1943 mission flown by 92nd Bomb Group Medal of Honor recipient John C. "Red" Morgan. The stark frankness with which this factual and rather grotesque moment of personal valor was handled by Lay and Bartlett did much to establish the film's unique credibility. Here was that other side of war seldom touched upon by Hollywood during the immediate post-war years.



(Top Right) The final breakdown, though considered to be "contrived" by one critic, was actually based on a factual event, not however, associated with Armstrong's career. In recent years this scene has led a number of contemporary film historians to label *TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH*, perhaps for their own purposes, an important "antiwar film". To this Beirne Lay, the Film's co-author, replied: "Everybody loathes war, most of all the guys who have to fight it. *TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH* aimed to dramatize the human 'price' a commander may pay, but at no time argued that you shouldn't fight when forced to by so evil a threat as Nazism. If by 'antiwar' (such writers) mean 'pacifist', (they) surely miss our point. If (they have) in mind deglamorization, Sy Bartlett and I are with (them)."

(Left center) Peck poses by the hatch of "23613", the B-17 later to be used by Mantz for the opening crash scene. "Where Angels and Generals Fear to Tread", the inscription displayed above the hatch, had earlier been seen on an Eighth Air Force bomber during the war by the film's co-author, Beirne Lay.

(Right center) Arriving on base as the new C.O. of the 918th Bomb Group General Savage (Peck) instructs a lax guard (Kenneth Tobey) in the proper procedures for clearing personnel onto a military post. Based on the true life experiences of General Frank Armstrong with the 306th Bomb Group, the film's fictitious 918th Bomb Group was created by Lay simply by multiplying 3X306th B.G.= 918th B.G.

(Bottom) Academy Award winning actor Dean Jagger poses in the Group's Officers' Club with the film's highly symbolic Toby mug. Originated by the RAF's war-time Bomber Command, the simple turning of such a piece of base furniture to face the room permitted the base commander to alert crews resting in the club that a mission was on for the next day, without tipping his hand to any civilian guests who might be on the base at the time. Adopted by the Eighth Air Force in 1942 such a mug was still reportedly in use by a U.S. Air Force B-57 squadron based in Vietnam as late as 1969.

Adams continues: "We had at first thought that we would go to England; but General "Snuffy" Smith, then AF-PIO, told us there were no B-17s operational there. He suggested Alabama or Florida because the last operational B-17s were returning from Caribbean weather patrol and could be made available."¹²

From McGuire, at King's insistence, King's party and deRussy flew down to Eglin Field in Florida. Of this particular flight deRussy now remembers: "I had flown a B-26 from Maxwell to McGuire. When we went to the airfield to take off for Eglin, Henry went directly to his Beech, did a quick walk-around inspection, boarded, cranked-up and took off, all in about twenty minutes. I, in accordance with Air Force and FAA regulations, filed an Instrument Flight Rules clearance and, consequently took off about 45 minutes later. Because of the enroute weather, I knew Henry had to fly instruments at least part of the way, and he did, although he had not filed any clearance and did not have an instrument rating. But, in spite of my speed advantage of about 100 mph, we arrived at Eglin within a few minutes of each other!

"I later made some flights in the L.A. area with Henry in his Bonanza. They were always somewhat frightening, but he always knew what he was doing and arrived safely at his destination.

"At Eglin we got complete cooperation from General William E. Kepner, the commander of the Armament Center, which may have influenced the choice of Eglin No. 3 (Duke Field) somewhat."¹¹

Adams continues: "We did not think Florida would look much like England, but flew down over Alabama and Northwest Florida and discovered that the Dothan area (of Alabama) could pass as South English countryside and that Eglin could be made to pass if we were careful about not featuring the (pine) trees."¹²

King and Adams agreed that the now derelict Ozark AFB, a former war-time training field, near Dothan, Alabama would do nicely for the opening scenes of the film which required an abandoned, overgrown English-type airfield. DeRussy adds: "The selection of Ozark was made by locating abandoned AFB fields and then inspecting them to find a macadam runway overgrown with grass."¹¹

A particularly favorite personal story of Henry King's involves his first "inspection" of Ozark. Prior to finding this Dothan location, King had spent a number of rather long days flying out of Eglin in his Bonanza 35, N-3206V, with his passengers, the late Leon Shamroy, John Adams and John deRussy, in search of an appropriate site for the opening scenes of the film.

King continues: "When I was searching for a suitable location for an abandoned airbase that had grown up in weeds, I was flying across Alabama and had my cameraman with me. I saw from the air the Ozark airbase and it seemed deserted--it was closed. However, I landed there and, after looking around, decided it was exactly what I needed. The grass and weeds around the runway were several feet tall. I took off and went back to Eglin, to get permission to use this deserted base, only to learn that it was not an Air Force base at all, but an Army base and, had I remained on the ground at Ozark another 10 minutes, I would have been placed under arrest for landing on a closed field without permission. The public relations (department at Fox) however, straightened this matter out and secured permission for us to use Ozark, Alabama."¹³

Ozark would also be the site for a number of the take-off and landing shots seen at the first and at the last of the film. Being located only some 95 miles to the northeast of the main base at Eglin also made it possible to dispatch the fire trucks and ambulances required for such aircraft operations. The now classic crash landing of the B-17 by Hollywood stunt flier Paul Mantz would also be filmed at Ozark. Except for a few tents erected specifically for the crash scene, there were no "structures" built by the Fox technicians in Alabama.



The two photos above are of one of a number of QB-17 drones used in the Operation Crossroads nuclear tests at Bikini Island in July of 1946. The aircraft is pictured here at its Eniwetok Island base prior to its initial sortie through "the Bikini Cloud". The box-like structure mounted atop the B-17 is a "particulate matter sampler". The bag-like device was installed in the bomb bay and used to collect samples of the various radioactive gases found in the atomic cloud. A Bikini drone such as this was later used by Mantz for his famous belly-landing scene. (courtesy Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory)

(Below) Veteran flier/director Henry King poses with the film's technical adviser, Col. John H. deRussy. (by permission of Mr. William Lavendar)



This, however, was not the case at Eglin Auxiliary No. 3, Duke Field, in West Florida. Duke, which was given over entirely to the Fox crews during their stay there, was located approximately ten miles to the north of the main base on a narrow two-lane road locally identified as State Highway 85. Its isolated location, surrounded as it was on this largest of Air Force reservations by hunting preserves, and its inactivity at the time made it an ideal site for the location crew to set up shop. There, in March of 1949, they set about the reconstruction of a typical World War Two period English airfield—the type Adams had come to know so well five years earlier as an Eighth Air Force bomber pilot with the 445th Bomb Group. At Duke, art director Lou Bransford supervised the construction of fourteen block and quonset-type buildings as well as an English-style control tower. A number of buildings already on the field also received “new fronts” for the duration of the filming schedule. The structures were then “aged” by the studio’s prop department in order to give the sets a “used” or “lived-in” appearance. Interior shots of the briefing room, control tower, and operations shack would also be shot in the working sets constructed at Eglin No. 3. These interiors were the cover sets should bad weather prevent filming out of doors for any length of time.

The Air Force loaned Fox a full dozen B-17’s, complete with crews, for the film. As many as six of these Flying Fortresses came directly from the First Experimental Guided Missile Group, later redesignated the 3205th Drone Group/Wing, based at Eglin’s main field. While most of these ‘G’ model B-17’s appeared externally to have retained their war-time configurations, many had, in fact, been extensively modified internally for use on various Air Force research projects as drones (QB-17L/N) or as drone director (DB-17P) aircraft. An additional four B-17’s were acquired at the Mobile Air Depot at Brookley AFB in Alabama. A number of these latter Fortresses had been used as cloud sampling drones during the earliest of the post-war atom bomb tests, Operation Crossroads, at Bikini Atoll in July of 1946. According to Col. Harvey Lidden, the Eglin Base Maintenance Officer at the time, although these B-17’s still showed evidence of the radioactive side-effects of these Bikini tests the radiation levels were so low as to be almost negligible for the relatively short periods of time the aircraft were in use.¹⁴

The last two of the twelve B-17’s reportedly came from the storage facility at Roswell AFB in New Mexico. In all, Lidden estimates that at least six of these peace-time bombers required new turrets for their temporary war-time roles.

Back in California, Zanuck reported worked closely with the Fox casting department and virtually hand picked the strong all-male leading cast which appears in *TWELVE O’CLOCK HIGH*. Gregory Peck was chosen for the starring role of General Frank Savage. Already a major star, Peck had made his screen debut six short years earlier in *DAY OF GLORY*. *TWELVE O’CLOCK HIGH* marked the last of Peck’s film commitments to Fox under his current contract. Gary Merrill, another young but up-and-coming actor in post-war Hollywood, had only recently made his starring debut in another aviation film, *SLATTERY’S HURRICANE*. In *TWELVE O’CLOCK HIGH* he would play Colonel Keith Davenport, the bomb group commander Peck must replace. The personable Hugh Marlowe would take on the role of the gold-bricking, air exec., Ben Gately. When contacted in New York, the veteran film and stage actor, Dean Jagger, enthusiastically agreed to play the role of Major Harvey Stovall, the retreat, ground exec., but with one reservation. Jagger had never appeared in front of the cameras before without his toupee. Out of fear of losing his youthful image with his audiences he had briefly considered turning down this otherwise excellent part if he could not wear the hair piece. King, however, insisted that the part had to be done sans toupee. It is a credit to Jagger’s good judgement that he did agree to this last stipulation, as the role was to win him an Academy Award for best supporting actor and start him off on a new film career.

A favorite story Beirne Lay likes to tell centers around actor Clark Gable. Lay reports that when Gable read the book in 1948,

the King of Hollywood liked the story and wanted to play the role of General Savage so badly for Fox that he tried to break his contract with MGM, where he was already scheduled to play another fictitious Eighth Air Force General, Dennis, in the film *COMMAND DECISION*. In retrospect, Lay feels Gable might have done an excellent job in the role.

THE FILMING BEGINS

With location manager John W. Adams’ pre-production chores at Eglin now behind him, the shooting company of actors and technicians, approximately 72 in all, began arriving in Florida on April 17th. Director Henry King returned along with Gregory Peck and the other major supporting actors in the film to Bacon’s-By-The-Sea, a rustic, cottage-type hotel between Santa Rosa Sound and U.S. Highway 98, about three miles west of Fort Walton Beach in the town of Mary Esther. Other members of the cast and crew stayed at hotels in the Destin area of Florida on Choctawhatchee Bay.

During the first three weeks of their stay in the southeast the cast and camera crews were constantly on the move, flying back and forth between Eglin and Ozark in a massive Delta Airlines DC-4. Adams had chartered for the occasion. At times during this period they would stay overnight in Enterprise, Alabama because of the heavy, early morning shooting schedule at Ozark.

Among the first scenes shot at the Alabama locale during this early part of the filming schedule was Jagger’s return to Archbury’s overgrown fields and derelict runway seen during the opening and closing moments of the film. Following this initial sequence the abandoned airfield was, to use King’s words, “policed up”; its tall grass cut and the runways generally made to appear operational once again.

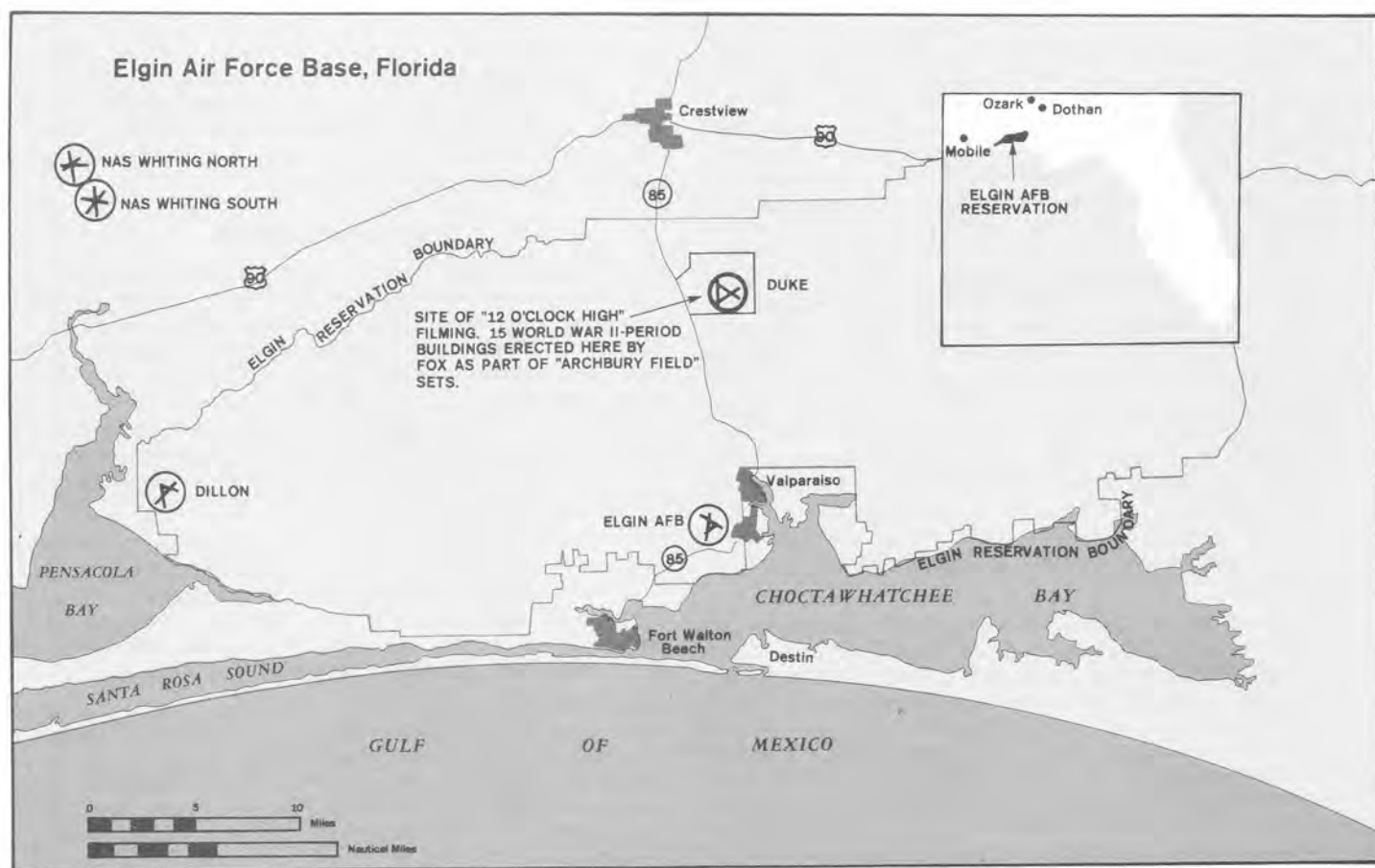
The twelve Air Force B-17’s were flown in from Eglin’s main field some 95 miles to the south. They were supported by Air Force emergency equipment, mainly fire trucks and ambulances, which had earlier been convoyed in from the Florida base. Once the Alabama field had been “policed up” the filming of all the mass landing and take-off sequences found at the beginning and at the end of the picture were begun.

Lt. Col. A. L. Haley, the Air Force’s liaison officer on the film, remembers: “During the filming at Ozark we utilized a portable ground station which we operated for remote controlled aircraft, for flight control and operational safety. After briefing the pilots for the scene to be shot and having them airborne, Mr. King decided he would like to change some of the action. Since I was standing beside him, I picked up the microphone and relayed his instructions to the airborne aircraft—and they responded accordingly. From then on he used the relay like a new toy.”¹⁵

As an experienced B-17 pilot and the ranking officer on the film, Col. deRussy personally led the formation flights, group landings and take-offs seen throughout the film. It is, in fact, deRussy’s apparently crippled bomber, with its one engine feathered, which is seen leading the initial landing sequence in the film. A particularly tight shot taken in close juxtaposition with a jeep and ground officer positioned in the foreground, it would require several retakes, at King’s behest, before the Fortress framed itself properly for the scene.

Ozark was also the site for the filming of what must certainly be considered the single most important sequence in the movie: scene No. 141, Savage’s climactic breakdown at plane-side -- a scene that offered actors Hugh Marlowe and Gregory Peck more than their fair share of hazards should they have misjudged the distances between the live props they had to work near in this sequence.

One of the last scenes shot at Ozark, towards the end of the first week in May, was also one of the most conflict-ridden, as well as dramatic to appear in the film. This was the famous B-17 belly-landing scene skillfully flown by the controversial Hollywood stunt pilot Paul Mantz. Long a legend as a talented pilot and a



Map by Pete Mersky.

shrewd businessman he had earlier “nearly caused cancellation of production”.¹¹ DeRussy continued: “Upon learning that the Air Force intended to provide B-17’s for this film, he (Mantz) wired USAF Headquarters threatening legal action because he had the capability of supplying the aircraft and crews to Twentieth-Century Fox.”¹⁶ Indeed the Air Force did consider withdrawing this support until the studio received a quote of cost from Mr. Mantz’s company. Based on this estimate, they informed the Air Force that it would be monetarily impossible to complete the film without the Air Force aircraft. In view of this information, the Air Force decided to provide the aircraft support.

“Mr. Mantz’s actions in this instance did probably influence the Air Force in refusing to allow any USAF or USAF Reserve pilot to perform the belly-landing at Ozark. Mr. King had asked if I would fly the aircraft for this scene. Having observed many B-17 belly-landings during the war and having considerable B-17 flying experience, I had no qualms about doing it but considered it appropriate to request approval from Headquarters, USAF.

“This was denied vehemently and requests to permit other experienced Air Force pilots, including non-active duty reserves, were likewise refused. So, Paul Mantz got the job.”¹¹

Originally Fox had hired Mantz only to film the air-to-air sequences of the film with his famed B-25 camera ship, The Smasher. However, prevented by the Air Force from using military personnel in the scene, King called Mantz in California. Mantz agreed to do the ‘landing’ for \$5,000. But King thought the proposal was “ridiculous” and replied: “Hell, I’ll do the scene myself for \$2,500!” As a veteran pilot of some renown in his own right, King considered the stunt to be of little challenge for any experienced pilot. Having earlier been obligated to refuse a number of former Eighth Air Force pilots at Eglin who offered to do the scene themselves for as little as a hundred dollars, King could hardly reconcile Mantz’s demand for \$5,000. Learning of King’s response Mantz replied: “Hell, if Henry can do it for \$2,500, so can I”.⁸

The aircraft used by Mantz for the crash scene was one of the Bikini drones found at Brookley Field. Safe for operations of relatively short durations, the aircraft was deemed “expendable” by the Air Force and so was used for the scene.

Mantz planned for the belly-landing with great precision and took every possible precaution for the safety of the stunt. He had his chief mechanic, Bob King, rig a welded rod across all four throttles and a long-handled master cut-off rod for the switches which he could readily reach from the pilot’s seat. Mantz would not have the help of a co-pilot on this flight.

The scene called for Mantz to carefully set the Fortress down on its belly in the dry Alabama field grass, within the limited viewing range of three fixed and unmanned cameras, and slide through a tent city specially prepared for the sequence. Prior to take-off, King once again reviewed with his long time friend what he expected of him and his aircraft in the scene. King continues: “I instructed Mantz to enter the traffic pattern with the group and gave him a location to land on the grass between the runways, with the wheels up. I considered Mantz an excellent precision pilot, and he actually put the airplane within ten feet of the touchdown point.”¹³

DeRussy continues: “He made at least one practice flight with a low approach over the crash site. On the final flight, he assured that only barely enough fuel was loaded to accomplish the flight and belly landing to minimize the danger of fire. Fire trucks and an ambulance were stationed near the spot at which the aircraft was expected to come to rest. However, we all miscalculated how far the Fortress would slide on the dry grass at Ozark. Remote cameras had also been installed just beyond the expected stopping point, but the aircraft slid well beyond the cameras and emergency equipment. It was fortunate that the cameras were not manned.”¹¹



B-17G's of the 305th Bomb Group line up during the latter part of World War Two for an early morning take-off. It was familiar scenes like this that became the standard by which this Group's former Operations Officer, Col. John deRussy, judged the progress on the making of TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH. Official USAF



As Operations Officer of the 305th Bomb Group during World War Two deRussy (far left) was well acquainted with the Group's "Iron-Tailed" commander, Col. Curtis LeMay (far right), whose own brand of flamboyancy later influenced characterization of "General Frank Savage". John H. DeRussy collection



Actor John Kellogg on the TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH set in Florida. John H. deRussy collection

The B-17 had slid nearly 1,200 feet. Mantz had managed to steer the giant land-bound bomber by a judicious use of the toe brakes, for, he discovered, although the B-17's landing gear was retracted, enough of the two main wheels remained exposed below the wings to offer the pilot some directional control of the skid. According to Mantz biographer Don Dwiggins and Mantz's business partner in later years, Frank Tallman, a metal rod, which had inadvertently been used to support one of the tents collapsed in the crash, and narrowly missed striking the windshield area of the moving Fortress.¹⁷

A completely erroneous statement issued by the Fox publicity department shortly after the crash claims that actor Gregory Peck had stowed away on the Mantz plane. They quoted Peck as having commented after the crash landing: "I thought it would be fun and certainly nothing to worry about with an experienced man like Mantz in charge of the controls." Both King and deRussy, as well as Adams, deny the incident ever happened. Adams went further by saying that Peck was in the Fort Walton Beach area of Florida at the time and nowhere near the crash site.

For a film crew on location, hard work, and lots of it, is usually the order of the day. The hours are long, and a working week lasts six days, not five as would be the case back at the home studio in California. It was this type of schedule that made the seclusion offered at Bacon's-By-The-Sea all the more inviting. There was, however, recalls Mrs. Virginia Harvey, the hotel's desk clerk, a price to be paid. "(There were) no phones in the rooms, the plumbing didn't always work, rain (which occurred rarely) never failed to flood the walks from the cottages to the main building, and the dining room was very frequently overcrowded with local curiosity seekers trying to see or meet Gregory Peck. They never did to my knowledge. But long distance telephone calls were the worst. There was one phone booth in the lobby by the desk. The door would never close. It took from 5 to 30 minutes to get 'operator'. Two or three people, at the most, could get a call through to California in an evening."¹⁸



TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH principles Gregory Peck, Dean Jagger, Hugh Marlowe and Gary Merrill at Ozark Field in Alabama during the opening weeks of the shooting schedule, April, 1949. Jagger later commented: "I liked my own role because I was able to pattern it after an Air Force Major, an aged school teacher, I met in England during the war." It was this man who served as the model for Jagger's characterization of the 'retread' Major Stovall. In the scene (right) Lt. Col. Ben Gately (Hugh Marlowe) appears with his 'misfit' B-17, the Leper Colony. As co-author Bernie Lay explains, Gately was primarily the creation of Sy Bartlett. "As a civilian with no prior military experience, Bartlett had a little bit more of a civilian's resentment for what he thought were some officers who traded on the old school tie. There were West Pointers whose father were generals. I would say he created the character and he was a very important character. I won't say he was a false characterization but I don't think he was too typical."

This latter inconvenience was especially frustrating for Peck whose wife, Greta, in California was expecting their third child at the time. Peck was housed in a special sea-side cottage known as the Eagle's Roost. It was often Mrs. Harvey's responsibility to awaken the film star in the mornings. She remembers Peck as a polite and unassuming individual who usually kept to himself and made no demands upon the hotel staff, unlike another lead actor working on the same film. Of all the actors staying at the hotel, she remembers veteran actor Dean Jagger as having been the most friendly and outgoing of the lot. He often "sat around by the lobby in the evenings and talked with the guests and hotel staff". It was, however, the more reclusive Peck who invited Mrs. Harvey and her husband out to Duke Field to view and film the actors and film sets located there.

It was from Eglin that the air-to-air photography flights for the film were staged. These flights were perhaps the last time so large a group of Air Force B-17's would ever be seen air-borne over their native soil. Most of the footage shot during these flights would be used in the sound stage process sequences to be filmed later in California. The balance of the World War Two period aerial combat footage was acquired at the Air Force film library at Wright-Patterson AFB in Ohio. Having flown many hours at the controls of a B-17 during the war, deRussy personally took part in much of the formation flying seen in the film. Of these photographic flights headed by Mr. Robert Webb, the Second Unit Director, deRussy recalls: "Mr. Mantz's B-25 camera aircraft was well-equipped for air-to-air photography and he flew it superbly to get some great film of formation flying. At one time he requested that we fly a formation through the clouds while he flew ahead shooting astern to film the formation breaking out of the clouds. This was quite difficult for us because bombers did not fly formation in clouds during World War Two. The fighters did, but bombers always penetrated overcasts individually and form up on top. In addition, the pilots for these twelve aircraft were selected from officer volunteers stationed at Eglin AFB, some with considerable B-17 flying experience and a few with very little. At any rate, we practiced until we were able to hold the formation through the clouds for this shot".¹¹

Though Mantz had requested more time, King had allocated only two days to get these air-to-air sequences 'in the can' -- and two days it would be. It would not have taken long, even at 1949 fuel prices, for the studio to have gone over budget if they had had to continue, for any length of time, to quench the thirsty appetites of a dozen airborne B-17's!

With shooting at Ozark now completed director Henry King pressed to finish out the balance of his location shooting schedule at Duke Field. The weather was generally very favorable and good progress was made here. It was, in fact, because of such good, dry Florida weather that cameraman Leon Shamroy often resorted to the use of a fire hose in order to help simulate visually the cold, damp English climate.

What follows is a vivid, first-hand account of the actual shooting of scene No. 98 in the film as told by the late C. E. (Tip) Mathews, formerly a staff reporter for the Mobile Press Register. Mathews was on the scene at Duke during the latter part of May, 1949.

"It was our first time to see movies in the making, a-la-Hollywood," explained Mathews. "The bright sun bore down heavily, and the heat which rose from the runway would have been unbearable but for that precious Gulf breeze."

"Arriving at the B-17, around which the 'shooting' was underway, we took our place under one of the wings of the ship and kept completely quiet, while director King gave orders to Peck on just how he wanted the scene done.

"Here's the way it went: Peck's plane had rolled to a stop after a mission (the first) over Germany. An officer comes to meet him in a jeep. Gregory jumps to the ground and is asked how the mission went. Peck answered: 'Rough--they were waiting for us'. Then he inquired about other flights and puffed vigorously on a cigarette that the officer handed him.

"Director King was hard to satisfy on the action. While we stood there, he had the two actors go through it at least five times. Peck was attired in a heavy flying suit, with fur-lined boots and jacket. He certainly must have been hot under the Florida sun, but you couldn't tell it by looking at him.

"When King ordered retakes Peck moved quickly back to the plane, reached up and swung his long frame into the ship--a bit of exertion which in itself would have worn out the ordinary man within a few minutes. At intervals, a makeup expert came out and dried perspiration from his face."

During a later part of this same sequence General Savage (Peck) discovers a stowaway sergeant (Bob Arthur) trying to escape his

notice. Mathews continues: "Here, Peck was at his best. While the cameras ground away, he called the sergeant on the mat and, with the hardboiled look of which he is so capable, forced a confession from the youngster and announced the stowaway would lose his stripes.

"Operations of the sound and camera equipment intrigued us. Here were more than a score of technicians sitting and standing about the set. Some of them had colored glasses, through which they constantly checked on the white clouds, while others kept an ear out for such sounds as approaching planes.

"The slightest cloud moving between the sun and the set had the effect of messing up the lighting, so the entire crew sat patiently and waited until the light was right again.

"Once during the 'shooting' a giant B-36 roared into hearing and the cameras stopped winding again. This big ship was impressive enough to make the Hollywood crews crane their necks as it passed over, very high, but noisily."¹⁹

Although the near isolation found at Eglin's Auxiliary Field No. 3 (Duke) made the site an ideal locale for the Twentieth-Century Fox film crews to set back the clock for a few brief weeks, the impermanence of events was very much in evidence. It would often be seen or heard intruding itself upon the tranquil skies above Duke Field and at Eglin's main base some ten miles to the south where advanced armament and avionics testing on the mammoth new B-36 bomber, the medium range B-47 and the F-84 fighter proceeded at an ever quickening pace. Not even the aging Flying Fortresses loaned to Fox by the Air Force could be looked upon with sound conviction that here at least is evidence of some fixture of permanence from the recent past. No, for even these proud machines would soon be consumed by progress as targets for a whole new generation of ground-to-air and air-to-air missiles.

THE RETURN TO CALIFORNIA

During the third week of May, with their shooting schedule now completed, the cast and crew began packing for the return trip to California. There they had yet another five weeks of studio work ahead of them before the film would be completed. At Duke the final task of the Fox technicians was to 'age' the sets for one of the opening scenes in the film. During the course of a few brief hours the Florida part of Archbury Field, its various quonset huts, block buildings, and control tower, were brought forward in visual time from 1942 to the near-present, the summer of 1948.

Fulfilling the contract made earlier with the Air Force by Adams, all of the recently erected "structures" were removed by the

studio with the exception of the large quonset hut constructed there for the Briefing Room scenes. This last Archbury building would serve on with the Air Force for many more decades to come.

Upon arriving in California, from the Florida location, the film's star, Gregory Peck, was hospitalized with an eye infection suffered on the return trip. Production was held up five days because the schedule called for Peck to work every day.

Among the most interesting scenes shot at the home studio, from a technical point of view, were the "aerial" close-ups or process shots. These are scenes which usually show closeups of the actors (most often non-pilots) at the controls of their aircraft as they hurtle through Hollywood's flak-filled skies. Such close-ups are actually shot on a studio sound stage specially designed to hold various sections of an aircraft's fuselage, in this case a genuine B-17G. The aircraft is carefully positioned before a process screen on which motion picture backgrounds are projected from the rear of the screen. The projector or process camera and the regular studio camera are electronically synchronized so that both camera shutters are open at the same instant, thereby avoiding a TV-like flutter.

In order to enhance the realism of the process scenes in *TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH* the Fox technicians constructed an electric-driven facsimile of the Fortress's number two engine. The carbon-monoxide exhausts from a fully operational R-1820 engine on a closed sound stage would have made working conditions an impossibility. The aerial vistas and scenes of B-17 formations used in these process scenes had earlier been shot from Mantz's B-25 camera plane over Florida and Alabama.

For deRussy, the film's technical advisor, one of the most trying moments in the film's production came during the filming of one of these process sequences.

"Sy Bartlett was on location (and at the studio) constantly, alertly guarding against any changes in his script. The climactic scene over Hambrucken at 26,000 feet, when Savage's wing aircraft received a direct flak hit and Savage came apart, really was a problem. As written in the original script, he removed his oxygen mask and took a package of cigarettes out of his tunic pocket. He removed one cigarette which was wet with perspiration, then removed another, and finally squeezed the package which dripped perspiration, and threw the package on the floor. No matter how distraught he was supposed to be, no knowledgeable flier would have believed this scene.

"Since the B-17 was not pressurized, removing the oxygen mask at 26,000 feet would result in unconsciousness in a very short time. In addition, the temperature at 26,000 feet was always far

This view of the process B-17's tail gun section shows how careful attention to markings detail makes the sound stage Fortress blend in with the air-to-air footage taken earlier over Florida from Mantz's B-25.



(Far Right) In this rather soft, but extremely rare candid 16mm shot of a contemplative Gregory Peck (left, foreground) and Col. deRussy (right) are captured conferring on a scene between takes at Eglin's Auxiliary Field No. 3 in Florida during May of 1949. (Photo by Mr. K. F. Harvey)





below freezing, often as low as -20°F to -30°F; so, even if nervous perspiration were present it would freeze, not drip.

"Remembering Mr. King's admonishment that he was going to depend upon me to assure that no World War Two pilot would see anything in this movie that was not authentic and technically accurate, I went to him and suggested that the script be changed. He advised me that he had already discussed it with Sy, who was adamantly opposed to any change. Mr. King then asked me to advise Sy that I had decided the scene must be changed. I did this at lunch in the studio cafeteria the next day, trying as diplomatically as I could to convince him that a more realistic scene would add to rather than detract from the movie. Again Sy was adamant, so, I told him that Mr. King had already agreed that it would be changed. It was five years from that day before Sy spoke to me again. By that time, of course, the movie was a great success and he never mentioned the episode again."¹¹

OPENING NIGHT

The filming of *TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH* was completed on the first of July, 1949. When edited the final cut of the film would run a lean 133 minutes. The result was a concise, sternly edited statement of America's measure at one of her most desperate hours, told with a measured authenticity seldom achieved by other films of this period.

The film was first premiered at Grauman's Chinese Theater in Hollywood on Christmas Day, 1949. A month later, on the night of January 26, 1950, the Air Force Association presented another "grand invitational premier" of the film at the Roxy Theater in New York City. The Fox publicity department was quick to point out that the following day, January 27th, marked not only the public opening at the Roxy but also the seventh anniversary of the "first daylight precision bombing of Wilhelmshaven" and the next day, January 28th, was noted as the eighth anniversary of the Eighth Air Force.

Both John Adams and John deRussy were on hand for the earlier Hollywood premier. One particularly fond recollection of the evening is offered by Adams.

"At the premier General Curtis LeMay, then Commanding General of the Strategic Air Command, sat at the pre-showing dinner with John (deRussy) and me. He remarked to John that he hoped all the 'usual' technical goofs in air pictures had been avoided, but he doubted it. John and I said that, in our opinion, there was only one thing technically wrong but that we would bet he would not pick up. He responded (in no uncertain terms) that he would indeed pick it up, whatever it was, and a half a dozen others in addition.

"After the showing, we returned to the hotel and asked the General where the technical error was. He said, 'By God, there weren't any mistakes in the film, although he never would have believed it!' We then pointed out that to increase the dramatic effect of air combat, the whining sound of attacking fighters had been introduced into the combat scenes and that, of course, you could not hear fighters from inside a bomber! Obviously, the dramatic license had been successful!"¹²

Successful indeed! The film was an immediate success with both its audiences and the critics.

One reviewer said of the film: "Quietly powerful, *TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH* ranks among the war's top pictures."

Writing for the December 26, 1949 Los Angeles Examiner Louella Parsons observed: "Curiously enough, the great pictures of the year have been war dramas, but few have been presented with the impressive integrity of *TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH* or with its technical perfection. Directorially and technically and from an acting standpoint, *TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH* is close to the perfect production."

The famed New York Times critic, Bosley Crowther, observed:

Opposite Page:

In one of the many beautifully choreographed and coordinated air/ground scenes found in the film a group of '918th B.G.' B-17's break into the landing pattern at Eglin No. 3.

Top Right:

Following Savage's mental break-down at plane-side, cameraman Leon Shamroy (far left) captures the take-off roll of Fortress '23613' at Ozark Field in Alabama. Appearing in this, one of the first sequences shot at Ozark, former Bikini-drone '23613' would conclude its flying career a few short days later at the hands of skilled Hollywood pilot Paul Mantz. Note runway area immediately about the Fortress has been hosed down in an effort to simulate the damp English climate.



(Above) "The Smasher", the B-25 camera ship Mantz used for the air-to-air sequences featured in *TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH*, is seen here some four years later on location over the Canadian wilderness for the CINERAMA world tour. The "greenhouse" nose was modified specifically for the CINERAMA filming. (courtesy Don Dwiggins)

(Bottom Right) Mantz's "\$2,500 belly-landing". Director Henry King later reported the skilled *HOLLYWOOD PILOT* set the Fortress down "within 10 feet" of the designated touch-down point.

(Below) Hollywood stunt pilot Paul Mantz, seen here during the mid-1950's with the B-25 camera ship he used to capture many of the spectacular air-to-air scenes featured in *TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH*. Courtesy Don Dwiggins



"The saga of our Air Forces and their accomplishments in the recent war already has inspired a number of pictures . . . But there hasn't yet been one from Hollywood which could compare in rugged realism and punch to *TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH*. Except for a final situation, which appears both unlikely and contrived, the story has thorough integrity all the way down the line."

When asked about this latter criticism, author Beirne Lay replied: "Not only was it not contrived, it was the basis for the whole book. This (incident) happened identically as you saw it at the end of the picture to a very fine commander who had been on four rough missions (in a row). Sy and I, when we were kicking this idea of writing the novel around, just couldn't really come up with what we thought would be the right ending. And then I remembered this case and I said, "Sy, it was a heart-rendering thing for me to see a guy who had all the courage in the world run up into a situation where he broke down and couldn't, literally, get in his airplane . . ." They had to get him off the base in 24 hours so as not to have the word get around and hurt morale. And Sy said: "Well, Beirne, that's it! We'll base the book on that. That's our ending and we will start from the beginning to show what the forces are that can tear a strong man apart." So it was based on a completely authentic occurrence."

Author: In other words, the reviewer didn't know what he was talking about?

"Unless he was talking about something else. The reviewer of the *Herald Tribune* observed that if Savage had had such a complete breakdown then he could not have come out of it as quickly as he did. At the end of the picture, you know, he sat there in a chair until the planes started coming back and then he sort of same out of the thing and went to bed. He (the reviewer) said a man that had a severe breakdown he said, clinically, he didn't think that a flight surgeon would believe that a guy who had spent it all like that could come out of it as quickly, if he ever came out of it. So if the reviewer was making that point he would have had something legitimate. But its not a legitimate point to say this breakdown was contrived."⁴

Based, for the most part, on hard historical facts and given that special life and credibility at the hands of two talented writers who had been there, the film was nominated for four Academy Awards in January of 1950. The nominations included best picture for the year 1949, Gregory Peck for best actor, Dean Jagger for best male supporting actor, and best sound recording. There was, however, some disappointment voiced by a number of critics at the time, among these Edwin Schallert, who felt a fifth nomination might have gone to Henry King for his fine directorial efforts on the film.

The 22nd Academy Awards Presentations were staged in Hollywood at the Pantages Theater on the night of March 23, 1950, little more than two months before the outbreak of the war in Korea. TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH would receive two Oscars, these going to actor Dean Jagger and to Thomas T. Moulton for best sound recording.

In the years that were to follow, the film would be aired again countless times on television throughout the United States and England. In recent years we have seen the phenomenon of virtual cults being drawn to it. Former Eighth Air Force veterans have been known to travel literally hundreds of miles into neighboring states when notice of its appearance on television has appeared in local newspapers.

They are, it has been said, in search of a world of known challenges, success and intense companionships not to be found again in their lifetime, save, perhaps, through the medium of the motion picture.

First shown in England in 1951, the film was received with mixed reactions by a populace already chafing from a number of post-war American films "telling us", as one English observer noted, "how the U.S. won the war." Nonetheless, the film is still used in England today by a large hotel and food group, training managerial staff on over-identification with their workers. It has also been rumored that the film has been used by the RAF as well as other branches of the British Armed Services for similar reasons by its various officer candidate schools.

When this writer asked Mr. Lay if he had ever seen the film again after its original showing, he replied: "Yes, I didn't see it again for a great many years, and I must say that I thought it stood up well. Bud Lighton used to say there's one adjective you can use about a picture, that is what everybody prays for, and that's unforgettable. There are not very many motion pictures that are unforgettable, but, he said, "if there is even one scene in this picture that's unforgettable then we haven't wasted our time. If we strike one false note anywhere in this screenplay, all your work is down the drain because audiences aren't stupid and you've lost them." I thought when I saw it again that it retained your confidence from beginning to end. You didn't feel that you were seeing something phony."⁴



REFERENCES:

1. According to TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH co-author Beirne Lay, Jr., as told to this writer during the interview of June 17, 1974.
2. Freeman, Roger A., THE MIGHTY EIGHTH, London: Macdonald and Company Ltd.; 1970, pg. 25.
3. As an USAF Captain, Lay was one of General Ira Eaker's "original seven" who figured so prominently in the establishment of the Eighth Air Force in England. Later Lt. Col. Lay commanded the 487th B. G. at Lavenham from 28 Feb., 1944 till he was shot down over France, 11 May, 1944.
4. Interview with Beirne Lay, Jr., by the author, June 17, 1974.
5. In an official publicity release of the period (undated) Harry Brand, Director of Publicity for Fox Studios, stated: "TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH, the book, published in the Fall of 1948, greatly impressed Darryl F. Zanuck, studio production head. He thought so highly of its possibilities for the screen that he selected it for one of his own personal productions and assigned Bartlett and Lay to pen the scenario."
6. This is, it must be reminded, only one man's opinion.
7. According to Zanuck, as later told to director Henry King.
8. This is King's recollection of the episode, as told to this writer during a phone conversation on 20 August, 1974.
9. At the time Col. deRussy was an instructor at the Command and Staff School at Maxwell and Chief of Division teaching new developments in aircraft engines, missiles, etc.
10. In a release of the mid-1949 period, the Fox Publicity Department claims King personally flew nearly 11,000 miles scouting possible film locations.
11. From the correspondence of John H. deRussy, to the author, 21 March, 1974.
12. From the correspondence of John W. Adams, to the author, 9 April, 1974.
13. From the correspondence of Henry King, to the author, 15 July 1974.
14. As told to this author by Col. Harvey Liddon, USAF (Ret.) in a phone conversation, 15 August, 1974.
15. From the correspondence of A. L. Haley, to the author, 12 August, 1974.
16. Mantz's actions in this instance have been confirmed by Col. Haley, Adams and Col. Liddon.
17. Such a narrow miss was not recalled by King, deRussy or Haley - all of whom were on the scene at the time.
18. From the correspondence of Mrs. Virginia B. Harvey, to the author, 10 February, 1974.
19. Mathews, C. E. "Hollywood On The Gulf Coast", THE MOBILE PRESS REGISTER; 22 May, 1949, section B, pg's. 1 and 9.
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Making of Twelve O'Clock High is James Farmer's 25th published article and is his most involved to date as it marks the end of a full year of personal and 'loving' research into this aviation film classic. An accomplished aviation artist as well as a writer Mr. Farmer has served on the Journal's staff as both associate editor and more recently as art editor. He has also kept his hand in by teaching high school art and ceramics in Southern California for the past eight years.