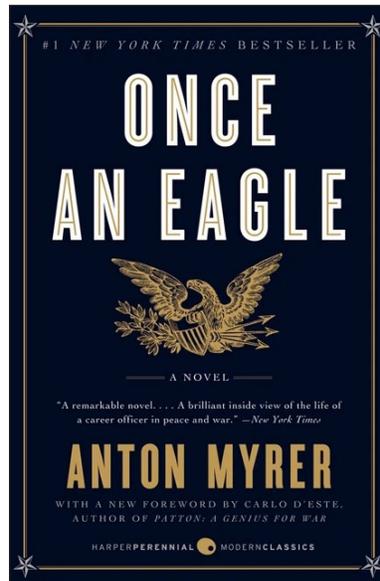


# Once An Eagle: Idol or Idle?

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Anton Myrer's *Once an Eagle* has topped reading lists of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Commandant of the Marine Corps, countless higher headquarters, and U.S. Military Academy at West Point since being published in 1968. No other book has enjoyed such durable preeminence, especially not a work of fiction. Why the obsession for a 1,000-page novel? By simple induction, we see that it is senior military leaders with the fixation. Such leaders committed to a career in their organizations and are charged with the task of forming the current and raising up its future leaders. Their reading lists are one means of executing this responsibility, and a closer look at one book that has never left their lists is revealing. *Once an Eagle* undoubtedly influences the American military psyche. However, the true dichotomy that Myrer brings to life in Sam Damon and Courtney Massengale is not the "troops' commander" versus the "savvy staff officer," but selfless service versus self-serving ambition. The former, false dichotomy is proliferated when senior leaders presume reading lists are sufficient formators.

Make no mistake, *Once an Eagle* enjoys unparalleled influence in our profession. It really has "a cult following in the Army," according to COL Jerry Morelock, a retired professor at the Command and General Staff College.<sup>1</sup> The effects of its influence, however, are nuanced. In a good way, it de-romanticizes combat. Over and over again, Damon demonstrates heroism at great personal cost, even earning the Medal of Honor. But is it worth it in the end? "The elation he dreamed of would not come," said Damon.<sup>2</sup> Myrer's own combat experience in World War II left him with an acute "awareness of war as the most vicious and fraudulent self-deception man had ever devised."<sup>3</sup> Such critical realism is healthy for junior leaders to consider before we find ourselves in similar situations. It also gives us a virtuous hero to emulate, one who faces the same personal and professional struggles all Soldiers do.

There are many, however, that argue *Once an Eagle's* influence is detrimental to the profession. When I asked a senior Chaplain his thoughts on it, he decried it for propagating the "West Point officer bad, mustang good" mentality. In an article published in *Foreign Policy*, MG (Retired) Robert Scales said, "the Army today venerates Sam Damon too much and castigates Courtney Massengale to its detriment."<sup>4</sup> For example, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff GEN Henry Shelton admits that Courtney Massengale was a "household name."<sup>5</sup> He used it "to say we shouldn't have an individual like that in the ranks" at events as consequential as promotion boards.<sup>6</sup>

*Once an Eagle* casts an unfair shadow not only on staff personnel, but on any means of achievement beside through command. To emphasize how nonsensical this heuristic is, a lieutenant colonel with 20 years of time in service is lucky to spend just five years of it in a command billet. What our senior leaders do not realize is that

they aide the “drive and brilliance” exodus every time *Once an Eagle* is copy-and-pasted onto the next reading list without a platform for dialogue.<sup>7</sup>

I was handed my copy from former CPT Richard Spinelli before I even made it up to West Point, but I think he got it right. Instead of telling me to not be a Massengale, he looked at me and said, “Everyone wants to be like Sam Damon, but you can be better.” The danger with *Once an Eagle*’s outsized influence is that the reader is often led to mistake the vessels for the morals. It is a font of professional, relational, and emotional virtue-ethics. We are invited to learn these lessons from both Damon and Massengale, but if we count Damon as the perfect model and Massengale as the villain, we fail to learn from the former’s shortcomings and the latter’s genius.

The more edifying dichotomy in *Once an Eagle* is between selfless service and self-serving ambition. Both Damon and Massengale have that type-A mix of aptitude and ambition, but Damon sought to serve Soldiers, whereas Massengale sought to serve himself at their expense. The difference is character. Damon emulates the war heroes he read about every night while working as the night clerk at his hometown’s hotel. Massengale imitated the men he looked up to: wielders of power and status like his father and uncle. Both leaders were hungry to learn, but Damon searched for truth, whereas Massengale searched for ways ahead. The greatest differentiator lied in Damon’s mentorship relationships, like the one he had with his former battalion commander, George Caldwell. If we junior leaders want to be like Damon, then we can start by imitating his humility to seek out and learn from others’ experiences. This also requires that the senior leaders with said experience humble themselves to share it with us, straight and uncensored.

Stories are important because they frame our outlook. How is a deceased, medically-discharged corporal like Myrer still influencing generations of military leaders today? Because he cared enough to tell the story. After visiting West Point in 1977, he later wrote of the cadets: “they are all of them your sons — all our sons, in a very real sense.”<sup>8</sup> In the same way a son or daughter inherits virtues from his or her parents, Myrer illustrates the preeminence of the mentor-mentee relationship not only in his life, but also in his characters. As a recently demoted first lieutenant after World War I, Damon credits Caldwell with being the sole persuader of his staying-on. Good leaders invest in their unit; transformational leaders invest in individuals.

Reading a story is low threat; it’s the conclusions we draw from stories that are consequential. If we draw these conclusions in a vacuum, then we run the risk of categorizing others as Damons or Massengales: a product of our intellectual lethargy and producer of dangerous predispositions. It is the dialogue and shared experience of mentors that offer the anecdote. So, if you have the experience, then reach out and start the dialogue. If you are like me and 37 of the 39 Soldiers in my infantry platoon without combat experience, then reach out and start the dialogue. One day, I bet we will be glad we did.

Love it or hate it, *Once an Eagle* enjoys an outsized influence on our profession; negative where it is recommended en masse, positive where leaders follow-up with dialogue. In the end, reading is good, but relationships are better. *Once an Eagle* is just one place to start.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Becker, “Military Goes by the Book, but It’s a Novel,” *The New York Times* (16 August 1999), accessed from <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/08/16/us/military-goes-by-the-book-but-it-s-a-novel.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Anton Myrer, *Once an Eagle* (NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968), 115.

<sup>3</sup> Sydney B. Berry, “No Time for Glory in the Infantry,” Assembly, The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, March 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas E. Ricks, “O! The Damage ‘Once an Eagle’ Has Done to My Army — and Yes, It Is Partly My Fault,” *Foreign Policy* (18 December 2013), accessed from <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/12/18/o-the-damage-once-an-eagle-has-done-to-my-army-and-yes-it-is-partly-my-fault/>.

<sup>5</sup> Becker, “Military Goes by the Book.”

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ricks, “O! The Damage ‘Once an Eagle.’”

<sup>8</sup> Berry, “No Time for Glory in the Infantry.”

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