

Once An Eagle by Anton Myrer.

Review by Colonel David T. Zabecki, FA (appeared in *Journal of Royal Artillery*)

The Army War College Foundation Press recently re-printed the book some have called "America's *War and Peace*." Anton Myrer's *Once an Eagle* was first published in 1968 to wide critical acclaim. When it appeared as a 12-hour television mini-series in the late 1970s, it returned to the New York Times best seller list and reached No.1. The book has been published in 19 languages.

Once an Eagle is one of the most important military novels ever written. In its stark and realistic descriptions of men in combat it ranks with *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Red Badge of Courage*. In its penetrating analysis of the human and technical challenges and the moral dilemmas of leadership and command, it is a fitting companion to Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny* and C.S. Forester's *The General*.

Myrer's book is the story of Sam Damon, a Nebraska farm boy who wanted to go to West Point, but who did not have the political connections that were necessary in the early years of the century to gain an appointment. Damon enlisted in the regular Army and served in the Mexican border operation of 1916. Two years later he was an infantry squad leader in France, where he earned the Medal of Honor and a battlefield commission.

Damon finished World War I as a major, but he had to revert to a first lieutenant to remain in the post-war Army. Damon's career as a company-grade officer then drug through the long and lean inter-war years, from post to dreary post in the American west, and to the overseas bases like the Canal Zone and the Philippines. Throughout this period of the book, Myrer paints a sharp portrait of the Depression-era U.S. Army and the often degrading conditions endured by the Marshalls, the Eisenhowers, the Pattons, and the Bradleys as they relentlessly honed their professional skills in preparation for the next war they knew would come all too soon.

Throughout Damon's career he was overshadowed by another officer, Courtney Massengale, the epitome of the ambitious, poised, and polished staff officer--but without Damon's leadership skills or combat experience. Damon, meanwhile, was continually dogged by his origins as a "Mustang." In an era when enlisted soldiers were considered little more than unskilled laborers, Damon resolutely defended them and their interests. His critics, Massengale foremost among them, dismissed Damon as never having made the psychological shift from an NCO to an officer.

At the start of World War II, Damon goes to the southwest Pacific, where his competence in combat eventually leads to divisional command. Near the end of the war, Damon is once more confronted by Massengale, who this time is his corps commander. At the story's climax, Damon's division is decimated in a Japanese counter attack after the corps commander prematurely commits the division's reserve elsewhere for no sound operational purpose other than the glory of capturing a Japanese-held city intact. Damon himself survives the action, but he is left with the moral conundrum of how--or even whether--to expose the powerful and politically connected Massengale.

The book easily could have ended with the conclusion of World War II; but in a short final section Myrer extends the story by taking Damon--and Massengale--up to the early years of Vietnam. Recalled from retirement as a lieutenant general in 1962, Damon is sent on a fact-finding mission to Vietnam--called Khotiane in the book. Damon once more faces Massengale, who is now a four-star general and the commander of the military advisory group in the country. Damon discovers and attempts to derail an effort by Massengale to bring America into a full-scale war in Southeast Asia. Before Damon can act, however, he is killed in a guerilla grenade attack.

In creating the character of Sam Damon, Myrer provides us with the benchmark for what an American officer can and should be. Damon, though, is human, and therefore far from perfect. What sets him apart is that he continually analyzes himself and tries to be the best officer he can be. On another level, Damon is a metaphor for the U.S. Army

itself in the first seven decades of the 20th Century--came of age in World War I, achieved greatness in World War II, and died in Vietnam.

This new edition of *Once an Eagle* carries a foreword by General John W. Vessey, Jr., the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, whose own career may well offer the closest parallel to that of the fictional Sam Damon. The current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Hugh H. Shelton, once wrote, "Sam Damon has been and will be a beacon of moral and physical courage for young American warriors."

In republishing the book, the Army War College Foundation has made this vital work accessible to an entire new generation of U.S. Army leaders. Many of today's general officers and colonels read *Once an Eagle* early in their careers; and because of that, the book had a profound influence on the shape and character of the post- Vietnam U.S. Army. Now the Army's future senior leaders, today's lieutenants, and captains, and majors, have the opportunity to read it as well. A re-reading of the book will also allow today's senior leaders to reflect upon the course of their own paths since they first read it.