

FACULTY GUIDE

IP

(4.0 CS)

COMMAND DECISION

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I. Introduction:

A. This IP is a case analysis using the classic movie, *Command Decision*, as the focus of seminar discussion of the tensions and heat that test reasoning, as well as the physical and moral courage, of **senior leaders** in combat. Most class members have a good deal of first hand experience watching wing-level units and their commanders. They have at least a general feeling for the skills and character traits a wing commander needs to be an effective leader. They probably also have some idea how they would function at that level. Some might even say that the fact they are here at AWC indicates that they probably already have the skills and traits needed to do the job at that level. Have they considered and reflected on **senior leadership** skills and traits needed for combat? Is it different? If so, it is a brand of leadership that few, if any of us, has had a chance to observe, much less experience. The skill and character traits needed for leading front-line units may not necessarily be the same as those needed at more senior levels. What then does combat impose on leaders at wing level and above? Some class members could be called on for that kind of **senior leadership** and all should start preparing for it now.

However, most class members are not likely to receive combat assignments at the wing level and below. Far more colonels will be on the staffs of higher-level leaders. What are the tensions on these staffs and their leaders in wartime scenarios? How we train in peacetime determines how we will fight in wartime. But, in peacetime, some of the attitudes we seem to reward in our officers are prudence and caution, predictability, getting ever more precise in “counting the beans,” in-basket management and getting caught up in the daily bureaucratic battles instead of looking at the long term strategy. How do you develop in yourself professional, military combat oriented behavior and character traits, keeping your eye on the mark, yet still function successfully in the peacetime environment? We want to concentrate on **senior leadership** in a wartime environment. What are the pressures? How do different individuals react to these pressures?

B. Desired Learning Outcomes:

1. Assess the demands imposed upon senior military leaders by combat.
2. Explore the ethical issues faced by senior leaders in combat.
3. Contrast the combat leadership requirements at the strategic, operational and tactical levels.

C. **Readings:** The DFL reading load is relatively light for this IP. However, this lesson is linked to and precedes the DFS IP on World War II – Air War in Europe (IP 6410). So remind your students to read the 6410 readings prior to this class.

1. “Decision Over Schweinfurt.” This article addresses daylight, precision bombing with large formations of B-17s, and the leadership of Gen Eaker, Commander of Eighth Air Force. The reading covers “fear”; the fear of the aircrews participating in perilous missions over Germany; Gen Eaker’s fear

arising from the awesome responsibility he felt: “While he had come to terms with a commander’s grim necessity to make decision that would cost men’s lives, he had not yet overcome the fear of making a decision that would squander lives.” The reading covers the challenges to leadership caused by canceled missions, the dangers to crews of the B-17 (aircraft was not pressurized or heated, danger of frostbite and anoxia), and the horrors of flying daylight missions over Germany.

2. The second article, “Speech to Cadets at the USAF Academy” by Brigadier General Mark Welsh, presents a motivational look at combat leadership. General Welsh describes the stress, commitment, bravery, religion, and ritual involved with combat. He shows the strain on men and leadership in war.

3. “Leading in Combat,” by Perry Smith was written just before Desert Storm and was published in the Air Force Times. It is interesting to note that this is the only article about leading in combat published in the last ten years by an AF officer. However, there are numerous articles written by Army and Marine officers. He shares 20 hints on combat leadership that are typical Perry Smith—use common sense and keep it simple.

4. In the last assigned reading Perry Smith draws a parallel between combat and crisis leadership. Both environments provide stress for senior leadership and the “fog of war” will cause confusion. He goes on to point out that past senior military combat leaders studied and debated war. He also raises the concern that present and future leadership are too busy with “today’s problems” to study their profession.

II. Lesson Conduct: This session is an intensive case experience in the factors and considerations senior leaders must face when leading large organizations during wartime. It is designed to examine several major issues associated with senior leadership. While *Command Decision* is a fictional account, it is based on actual issues facing senior commanders in the US 8th Air Force in 1943. Using the concept of daylight bombing as a vehicle, the film addresses such senior leadership issues as decision-making in the face of heavy combat losses, dealing with the external environment, ethical behavior, and relationships with the media and Congress. The class members will be asked to use the situation to revisit and gain greater insight into senior leadership, particularly during combat situations. They will view the first half of the movie, break into subgroups, discuss the alternatives available to the two principle characters in the film and parallel situations currently facing the military. We will follow this timetable:

0800 to 0805 Introduction in seminar rooms
0805 to 0910 Movie, Part I in Seminar—Channel 44
(Stop: “Will you gentlemen wait in the other room?”)
0910 to 0920 Break
0920 to 0950 Case Study: Two Groups, A: Bmd Cmd B: Bmd Grp
0950 to 1020 Brief Alternatives
1020 to 1030 Break
1030 to 1120 Movie, Part II in Seminar--Channel 44
1120 to 1130 Break
1130 to 1200 Seminar discussion and wrap-up

A. The week prior to viewing the movie, the course instructor should divide the seminar into two groups (A/B). Try to have an even mix between “operators” and support types as well as with other services.

One group will represent MG Kane (Walter Pigeon) Bomber Command while the other will represent BG Dennis (Clark Gable) Bomber Group. At the same time that you divide the seminar, you should appoint those to play Pigeon and Gable. The purpose of each group will be to analyze and present the alternatives of each commander who has opposing perspectives on how the air war should be fought.

B. During the seminar session, subgroup work, and seminar discussion, students will

1. Analyze relevant senior leadership concepts.
2. Analyze adequacy of the actions
3. Suggest alternative approaches to the situation
4. Prepare a 10-minute briefing discussing alternative plans from both sides of the issue.

MG Kane represents one perspective. BG Dennis represents an opposing view. See Power Point slides.

5. After viewing the second half of the movie, discuss their courses of action against what actually happened. Finally, relate this scenario to some current parallel situations.

C. Several possible alternatives available to the commanders are:

MGen Kane possible alternatives and consequences:

1. Let Dennis proceed with “Stitch” and risk losing the aircraft to combat losses or to other competing causes, losing Congressional support for more resources to adequately fight the war, and possibly even losing his own command.
 2. Replace Dennis immediately and salvage all the above while risking the future with the Luftwaffe
- Note** Alternatives proposing better fighter coverage are probably not feasible because fighters capable of doing this did not exist.

BGen Dennis possible alternatives and consequences:

1. Continue with “Stitch” in the face of almost certain high combat losses.
2. Delay “Stitch” in hopes the new German fighter will not be as bad as expected.
3. Seek other high value targets with more immediate paybacks – this may be a cop out solution.
4. Hoard B-17s until adequate fighter escort is available

D. Remember, our objective in this seminar is to comprehend the wartime environment for senior commanders and leaders and then analyze the unique requirements of senior leadership in combat and while preparing for combat. The case study allows the class member to focus on senior leaders in combat at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels. A corollary question of what impact does the senior leader have in combat is equally interesting when reversed. What is the impact of combat on senior leaders?

E. This leadership seminar should draw upon all previous leadership periods. How has technology changed things, if at all? What will senior leaders face today if the “balloon” went up versus what was experience in World War II, such as women in combat or heavy casualties? How would this factor and others such as jointness impact senior leaders and their organizations if the movie *Command Decision* were remade to depict a war scenario in the 1990s such as Bosnia?

Questions for Study and Discussion (with possible responses):

1. How does the leadership environment change as an officer advances from squadron command to senior leadership positions? Is leadership in combat different from leadership during peacetime? How?
 - a. Squadron command is more personal, due to more direct contact with troops.
 - b. Mission is bigger part of focus for more senior leadership, up to point where strategic view and national perspectives are more significant. Senior leaders need to balance the human perspective with the mission and strategic perspectives.
 - c. Peacetime leadership focuses more on taking care of troops. Wartime leadership is more likely to consider mission accomplishment with the cost measured in terms of lost lives.

2. In combat, how does a senior leader balance the competing demands of mission accomplishment and minimizing casualties?
 - a. Approach is to minimize losses while still accomplishing mission. May need to prioritize missions and targets. Some targets may be worth sacrificing lives while others may not. Tough choices!

3. When, if ever, should leaders compromise their principles if it helps accomplish the mission?
 - a. Answers will run the gamut here, and should lead into a good discussion. Range of answers will be from never compromising principles, to a discussion of what principles are subject to compromise and what are your priorities based on how great a threat the enemy is to your nation. Put this into a core values context. Many officers view core values as superficial or as a gimmick, but they have application in this context. Should we be willing to loose lives to stop another Hitler, while not sacrifice any lives when fighting some lesser foe?

4. How does the senior leader contend with external influences -- like Congress, the media, civilians, and families -- during wartime? Suggest several guidelines.
 - a. Possible approaches should include using your public affairs professionals, openness without compromising military surprise, reminding people of the criticality of the mission (if it is critical) and sincere compassion toward families.

5. How does a senior combat commander measure victory? Bombs on target? Attrition rates? Maintaining public support? High unit morale?
 - a. The terms of victory should be defined by our national command authority(strategic objectives).
 - b. May also include operational level objectives and measures of merit.

6. To what degree does combat seem to turn a commander's decisions into moral and ethical issues?
 - a. The moral and ethical issues take on a greater significance because combat involves the loss of lives, huge consumption of resources, and massive destruction of property, infrastructure.

Summary This seminar should provide some excellent discussion on the many facets of leadership and the factors that influence it. Hopefully, class members will gain a greater appreciation of the unusual pressures imposed by combat on senior leaders. This is really the essence of military leadership or the true test of a senior military leader. It is often the determining difference in battle, and certainly is the distinguishing characteristic of the military versus leadership in civilian environments.

Command Decision -- The Historical Context

Hollywood took justified liberties with the problems facing air-power decision makers so this motion picture would have the focus and simplicity needed by a normal audience. By the late summer of 1943, American commanders were sending their B-17 bombers on precision destruction daylight missions against military-industrial targets deep in Germany while British crews carried out area destruction missions at night. Losses in these daylight missions were high, but the Western Allies had agreed in May 1943 (Operation Pointblank) that the long-term objectives of the strategic bombing offensive could not be achieved until the growth of the German fighter force was stopped by destroying planes and the factories that made them.

In the movie, this broad target array of factories is reduced to three deep targets by linking it to jet fighter production. Jets were not actually the problem worrying the decision makers, but German airplane production had not yet been dispersed in 1943 and was in fact centered in three distinctive target areas, all of which were beyond the range of the Allied fighter escort aircraft. In 1943 precision bombardment was still limited by visibility over the target area, so the pressures of weather opportunities must have been as central to the decision process as the movie depicts.

The policy implications of strategic air operations are rather accurately depicted in Command Decision. In a September 7, 1942 "Attention to Duty" memo for his General and Special Staff Sections, Ira Eaker, Commander of 8th Air Force, wrote:

"Our bombers and their crews are doing more than just fighting the enemy during this critical phase. They are determining methods of combat and deciding strategic, tactical and even political factors of tremendous import to all of us individually and to the outcome of this war. Some of those factors now in the balance, which this small organization will be greatly instrumental in deciding are:

- a. The feasibility of daylight bombing.
- b. The air forces which will be built up in this theater.
- c. The feasibility of independent Air Force operations.
- d. Future plans for winning the war--the major theater--the principal enemy--the destruction of vital enemy objectives."

All of these sensitive issues remained unresolved in the late summer of 1943. As early as 1939, President Roosevelt had committed the nation to produce 50,000 military aircraft, but clashes between Air Corps spokesmen and the House Military Affairs Committee over actual appropriations began shortly thereafter, and the buildup of the forces needed for strategic bombing had been slower than anticipated. The bombers that had been produced were coveted by Allies, air components in other theaters, and naval commanders worldwide (primarily for use in anti-submarine warfare). The "Washington meeting" depicted in the movie represents this continued high-level conflict among demands for long-range bomber resources.

By September 1943, enough U. S. Bombers had reached England to allow 8th Air Force to form bombardment divisions composed of bombardment wings, each having 2-3 groups. The bombardment divisions had the assets of a full-fledged command, and the movie depicts the tension between a bomber command and division commander. The aircraft depicted are B-17s. By 1943 these would have included various improved versions each carrying ten .50 caliber machine guns, giving the massed bomber formation significant firepower potential against attacking fighters. By 1943 the airpower professionals in this film were looking forward to commanding B-29's being sent to the Pacific first because distances there required the new aircraft's greater operating range.