

# Vision Fest Film Festival 2009

By: Alan Armstrong, Esq.

## A DRAMATIC READING OF PREEMPTIVE STRIKE SCREENPLAY IN NEW YORK

### **I. SETTING THE STAGE**

Preemptive Strike, my screenplay, won the screenwriting competition at the Vision Fest Film Festival in New York in September of 2008. However, I was in Washington, D.C. on a case and had to miss the festival. As part of my award, Vision Fest agreed to stage a dramatic reading of my work at the Cherry Pit Theatre in New York, in or near Greenwich Village. Ari Taub would direct the performance. Ari is no stranger to Second World War dramas, having directed *The Fallen*, a movie set in Italy in 1944 dealing with the lives of American, German and Italian troops. The film was edited again and released as *Last Letters from Monte Rosa* and is enjoying commercial success, particularly in Europe. About 15 days before the performance, Ari and I discussed the need to abbreviate my screenplay, since the goal was to have the reading consume no more than an hour and one-half. Over the course of four days, I edited and re-wrote the script to reduce the length from 125 pages to 95 pages. This required that the events carried out in a number of scenes be replaced with voice over by a narrator who would describe the events in the

### **II. WELCOME TO NEW YORK AND VISION FEST**

My wife, Marlene, and I arrived at the Tribeca Theatre around 7:30 p.m. on Friday, June 19, and were promptly greeted by Frank Lewallen, one of the executive producers of the reading. Frank was extremely cordial. He made us feel right at home. We were then introduced to Mark Doyle, another executive producer of the reading.

As we first stepped into the lobby of the Tribeca Cinemas, I was pleasantly shocked when I saw the cover of the playbill for the reading. It featured a photograph of my replica Nakajima Type 97 Navy Bomber with the word “preemptive” in white letters and the word “strike” in red letters.

Marlene took a look at the Vision Fest Film Festival program. A full page was devoted to the staged reading of my screenplay along with a photograph of the author in his aircraft. Frank gave Marlene and I “filmmaker” passes and credentials and recommended a restaurant down the street from the cinema called “Walker’s.” We had yet to meet the driving force behind the festival, Bruno Derlin. As Marlene and I walked down the street toward “Walker’s,” it appeared there were high expectations for the reading of my screenplay. I hoped their expectations would be met.

Walker’s was a colorful restaurant next door to a police precinct. Police cars were parked partially on the sidewalk to provide

more space in the road for traffic. Also, we saw a policeman grooming a horse and took a picture of them. The policeman was very friendly. After dinner, Marlene and I returned to the cinema for the nine o'clock showing, *Pardon Me Mister Speaker*, dealing with the challenge by Paul Newell in his effort to unseat the Speaker of the New York House of Representatives. As we returned to the cinema we got to meet Bruno Derlin, who, like Frank, was extremely cordial.

Bruno made Marlene and I feel more than welcome as he ushered us into theatre number one. As the movie concluded, we looked across the isle and saw Mr. Newell, the central character in the documentary film we had just seen. Following the movie, Bruno introduced the filmmaker and Mr. Newell who entertained questions from the audience.

As Marlene and I left the cinema, Bruno and Frank gave us the impression they had great expectations for the reading of my screenplay the next day. As we arrived at our hotel, our daughter Sarah arrived and we were hopeful the following day would yield positive results.

### III. SATURDAY – THE DAY OF THE READING

Like Friday, the day of our arrival, Saturday was cloudy and rainy, only more so. After brunch, we walked around the community of Tribeca and then made our way cab to The Cherry Pit Theatre in or near the community of Greenwich Village. When we finally arrived at the theatre it was pouring rain. The Cherry Pit Theatre appeared to be part of a collection of buildings. The entrance façade had a rectangular structure with black and red colors.

As we arrived in the theatre, it was distinctly dark with light illuminating the stage where the actors were rehearsing. We were initially greeted by George Wienbarg, the narrator in the screenplay. George made it a point to tell me he was a pilot. Next, Ari Taub introduced himself and I gave a bag containing flight suits and flight jackets to a young lady assisting in the production. Our sound and lighting technician was named Fabio, and I reviewed the music and sound effects involved in the screenplay.

In the midst of the rehearsal for the performance that was less than 45-minutes away, Ca-triona Rubens-Stevens, playing a British singer, was rehearsing *It's a Long Way to Tipperary*, accompanied by the rest of the cast. It was meant to have the sound of a boisterous drunken crowd singing along with her. Not everyone had mastered the melody; so I led them through several singing rehearsals. It was certainly a chance to get out of one's comfort zone. Although I did not know it at the time, the rehearsal was being captured on film by one of the two cameramen I hired to record the event.



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After the rehearsal, the actors and actresses filtered backstage into a dressing room where they donned appropriate attire. Jeff Joslin, who played Claire Chennault, donned the Flying Tigers jacket I had brought to New York. Luke Scholl, who played Billy McDonald (Chennault's wingman), donned my tan flightsuit, and Christopher Cooper (from Great Britain) was attired in an appropriate uniform as he played Royal Air Force Group Captain Manning.

While the actors were attending to their wardrobe requirements, I was busy reviewing the specific pages in the screenplay requiring music and/or sound effects. The theatre was now almost totally empty except for the cameramen, stagehands and my wife and daughter. I was wondering if anyone was going to attend. I did not realize at the time that the theatre had not been opened and the audience was waiting outside in the lobby.

There was a last minute problem with the camera microphones my videographer in Atlanta, Gene Norman, had requested. When they were removed and replaced with different microphones the problem was solved. With John Sousa marching music playing over the sound system, the members of the audience filtered into the theatre. Finally, Ari Taub, the director, announced it was show time. George, our narrator, welcomed members of the audience to the reading and introduced the cast as one would introduce the members of a sports team before a big game. The whole affair was very upbeat with the Sousa marching music in the background.

After the actors and actresses were introduced, George set the stage with the opening narration. As we joined Chennault, Billy McDonald and Luke Williamson at their final appearance as *The Three Men on the Flying Trapeze* at the 1935 All American Air Races, the audience heard *Semper Fidelis* now playing in the background.

Gary Glasser's portrayal of President Roosevelt and Martin Barbas' portrayal of Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau were particularly convincing as Chennault's plan to form a "guerilla air corps" and bomb Japan from secret air bases in China began to unfold. As the concerns of bombing raids were voiced to the Japanese Diet in January of 1941, Jody Ebert gave a spirited impersonation of General Tojo.

In time, we found Chennault in the jungles of Burma training the first American Volunteer Group (AVG) – the fighter group. Karen Brelsford gave a convincing performance as Olga Greenlaw, wife of Harvey Greenlaw, Chennault's executive officer. It should be noted that Debra Lord Cooke gave a solid performance as Nell Chennault, the long suffering wife of the central protagonist. The women in the cast were attired in 1940's dresses which added to the authentic flavor of the event.

As RAF Group Captain Manning was the recipient of AVG hospitality in the form of a buzz job of Mingaladon Airfield in Rangoon, we had the sound effect of a low level fighter



Bruno and Jana Derling and Alan Armstrong

As time was running out for delivery of the bombers and Chennault's bombing plan fell behind schedule, we were treated to the acting of Gary Glaser as FDR and Martin Barabas now playing Dr. Lauchlin Currie, FDR's trusted aid who became an all-too willing confederate in Chennault's plan to bomb Japan.

Jeff Joslin as Chennault and Foster Davis as Harvey Greenlaw lamented the fact that the American bombers had not arrived on schedule when word came of a Japanese troop convoy sailing from the Yangtze River in late November of 1941. Finally, they had open conversations about where Japan might strike in the early morning hours before the attack on Pearl Harbor. The ever reflective Chennault surmised that the focus of Japan's attack would most likely be Pearl Harbor as the battle sequences and climax in the story emerged.

As George read the epilogue, we heard somber music playing over the sound system and finally, as the members of the cast took their bows, the audience evidenced its approval with a resounding applause.

#### **IV. THE REACTION OF THE AUDIENCE TO THE PERFORMANCE**

As the dramatic reading concluded, George introduced Bruno who recognized me as the writer of the best screenplay for 2008 Vision Fest Screenwriting Competition. Then members of the audience asked questions about the story and gave their assessments of the performance. The *Preemptive Strike* story was uniformly recognized as re-writing the history of the attack on Pearl Harbor and how the adventures of Claire Chennault and his band of mercenaries in Burma were related to Pearl Harbor.



Frank Lewallen and Mark Doyle

Jill Yablon, one of the producers, was adamant: "This film must be made." Marion Dreyfus, a professor at a college in New York, was similarly enthusiastic. Mary Allen, a public relations consultant who works with Ari Taub, had any number of suggestions for advancing my Preemptive Strike projects (the screenplay and the book).

The cast and crew agreed to adjourn to the White Horse pub, a short distance from the theatre where I bought a round of drinks for the actors and got three playbills autographed by the cast for posterity. After a quick bite of dinner, Marlene, Sarah and I returned to Tribeca Cinemas to view a number of features, including *Sand Hogs*, a documentary film on the works of the men who dig and service underground tunnels in and around New York. At the conclusion of the feature, we were introduced to the filmmaker along with the hard-working men who appeared in the film. The final feature of the evening was *Officially Rejected* that dealt with the perils and pitfalls of competing for fame and fortune in film festivals.

## V. CLOSING NIGHT

The feature on closing night, Sunday, June 21, was *Like Dandelion Dust*, featuring the Academy Award winning actress Mira Sorvino. As was true on Saturday evening, Bruno Derlin expressed great satisfaction with the reading of my work and asked me to stand and be recognized before the awards ceremony began.

In no time at all, Vision Fest 2009 was concluded. So, it was time to spend time with our new friends, discuss future projects and take a few pictures.

## VI. A POST-MORTEM ON THE DRAMATIC READING

You cannot achieve your goals if you do not believe in what you are doing. Similarly, you cannot expect to succeed if you do not direct your energies toward the realization of your goals and dreams. It is too early to tell what impact the dramatic reading in New York will have on bringing my screenplay to life. The dramatic reading at Vision Fest 1009 was a wonderful experience and gave me a sincere appreciation for the hard working men and women devoted to film and entertainment endeavors in New York. A couple of days after Vision Fest was over, Ari Taub and I spent time touring the USS Intrepid, which houses a number of vintage aircraft and had a moving film presentation on the Kamikaze pilots. Everyone involved in the Vision Fest Film Festival was terrific.

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Tribeca Cinemas



From left: Alan Armstrong, Mark Lewallen, Sarah Armstrong