

# C O M M I N G

# CLEAN

By Mark L. Allred

*The cadet learned about justice the hard way. But Heavenly Father's plan offers mercy as well as justice.*

I have served as an Air Force attorney and military officer for over 20 years. Some time ago, I had an experience that taught me something about the Atonement.

One day Cadet Smith\* knocked at my office door. Like many at the Air Force Academy, Cadet Smith had long held the dream of flying as a pilot for the Air Force. It was spring, and he was now within a few months of graduating, receiving his commission as a second lieutenant, and going on to pilot training.

Cadet Smith sat down and said, "You're a lawyer. Anything I tell you is confidential—it won't go anywhere—right?"

"Yes. You know that," I replied. Cadet Smith then explained his problem. A few months earlier, during the Christmas holidays, Cadet Smith had been away from the Academy in a nearby community. After an evening of partying, he had been arrested for driving drunk. As I recall, there may have been a minor accident. But there was no serious damage to property, nor injuries to any person. Some weeks after his arrest, Cadet Smith went to court in that local community where he pleaded guilty and received a sentence that included a stiff monetary fine and a period of probation. As far as the civilian community

\* Name has been changed.



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was concerned, the matter was basically over.

However, the situation had not been settled with the Air Force. Cadet Smith had not yet informed his commander or any military authority. He feared the impact his drunken driving might have on his Air Force career.

“Should I come clean, and tell the Air Force?” he wanted to know. “What should I do?”

After some thought, I explained to Cadet Smith that I was required to speak to him candidly and directly. “Basically, you have two options. Option 1 is to play by the rules. Turn yourself in, explain everything to your commander, and face the consequences. In all likelihood that dream of becoming a pilot will be lost. The Air Force will not offer extremely expensive pilot training and control of multi-million dollar aircraft to a person with a drunk driving arrest. Worse still,” I continued, “once your arrest becomes known, your entire standing at the Academy will be in jeopardy.”

Cadet Smith waited for me to continue. “Let us now look at the alternative, Option 2. On this path, you say nothing to your commander. You continue to lie low, hoping your drunk driving conviction will never be discovered.

“The problem, of course, is that you have a duty to report the matter. You know you do. And every day you fail to do so you are making matters worse. You will continue living under the fear of being found out. Waiting and wondering will be miserable for you.

“In the near future, and repeatedly throughout the years of your service, you will be required to fill out official questionnaires. You will have to declare, under oath, whether there has ever been an arrest or conviction by civilian authorities. If you deny this, you will be committing an integrity violation and further serious crime under federal law.”

I sensed his distress, and I felt bad for Cadet Smith. From what I knew of him, he was a decent young man who had made a mistake. He left my office alone, in a state of confusion and sorrow.

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I could not fault the Air Force for its rules and standards. Here was a manmade system where the young man faced only harsh, negative consequences for his transgression. All he had was justice.

It occurred to me that if Jesus Christ were involved, if we had divine law rather than merely that of men, there would be mercy as well as justice. The Lord would know this young man’s heart. If he were truly penitent and fully resolved to do nothing like this again, there would be a way out.

I recognized that we are all Cadet Smiths in one way or another. We all, with our own faults, are sinners like this young man. The Lord has promised, “For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent” (D&C 19:16). We are all in great need of His mercy. We all have great reason to fall on our knees in fervent gratitude for the forgiveness the Lord offers. **NE**

**NEmore**

To learn more about mercy and justice, see “The Mediator,” by President Boyd K. Packer (*Ensign*, May 1977, 54).

