

A meeting with the 'Jumping General'

My View

By Anthony J. Marolda

I remember the morning well, even though it happened in the early '80s. I was waiting for the general to meet me in my office. I had met him a few times before, but this time was to be special. He was going to call his friend, Gen. Matthew Ridgway. I was to be introduced to the famous World War II commander of the XVIII Airborne Corps. Gen. Ridgway was on the board of directors of a particular company and I wanted a meeting with the chairman of that firm to discuss a business matter. I had hoped that the call to Ridgway could arrange the visit for me.

Eventually, the tall, slender, ramrod-straight Gen. James Gavin entered my office. He had been the commander of the 82nd Airborne Division during World War II and had jumped with his men into several battles including Sicily, Normandy and the Battle of the Bulge. Since he had more combat jumps than any other general officer, he was termed by the press, "The Jumping General."

We started to talk. I remember him asking me if I had thought of joining the Airborne and becoming a trooper. He wasn't serious since I was already a 30-something management consultant at Arthur D. Little Inc., while the general was the chairman of the board. He had been the ambassador to France under President Kennedy and the chairman of Arthur D. Little for many years, yet his mind was still rooted in his time as the 82nd's commander during wartime. And well it should have been.

Gloucester has a strong Marine JROTC program, and many of our teens look to the military as a place of honor to serve their country. Gen. Gavin's life story could be an inspirational one for them. His character was molded in the military and his strong, decisive approach to problems guided him throughout his life.

His beginnings were rather humble. At age 2, Gavin was placed in a Brooklyn orphanage by his alcoholic mother, Katherine Ryan. Two years later, he was adopted by Martin and Mary Gavin. Martin was a hardworking coal miner from Mt. Carmel, Penn. The Gavins were poor, so Jim left school after the eighth grade to work and help support his family. At 17, he saw no future for himself in Mt. Carmel, so he ran away to New York to join the Army. Even though he was underage, the recruiter found a way to get the young

man into the service. For his first assignment, he was stationed with an artillery group in Panama.

The young private was extremely bright and an intense reader. During his off hours from his military duties, he read extensively in the camp library about the Civil War and World War I, focusing on famous generals. He became excited about the idea of commanding men in battle and decided that he wanted to go to West Point. Encouraged by his superiors, who saw his potential, Cpl. Gavin passed the exams and entered the Academy at age 19. He had to work harder than the other cadets because he didn't have a formal high school education. Yet, he did well and graduated in 1929.

Gen. Gavin's exploits during World War II were nothing short of amazing. He described them in his book, "On to Berlin." I've read that book a few times, and always find myself in awe at the heroic actions of Gavin and his troopers.

After graduation from West Point, the young lieutenant had a rapid rise in the Army. He had a few jobs in infantry units and then went on to teach at the Military Academy. It was the late '30s, and the ever curious and inquisitive young officer became interested in the possibilities for the use of airborne troops. The Germans were among the first to develop airborne as a military weapon. He studied their tactics in one of their airborne assaults during their invasion of Belgium in May of 1940. Gavin was intrigued and volunteered in April of 1941 for a new airborne unit that was being formed. That's when he first met Gen. Ridgway.

Gavin, the bright, energetic, personable young captain, impressed his commanding officers and he was given the responsibility for developing the tactics and basic rules of airborne combat. He wrote the manual that would then be used by the Army in its training. As a result, he became recognized as the architect of the emerging airborne tactics. This fueled his rapid rise in an army that was now clearly headed for war. He soon rose to the rank of colonel and had command of the 505th Parachute Regiment of the newly formed 82nd Airborne Division, under the command of Gen. Ridgway.

After months of exhausting training, Gavin and his men were ready for their first mission. Ridgway selected Gavin's regiment for a critical assignment in the invasion of Sicily. Gavin accompanied his men and

made his first combat jump onto the island. The mission was to support Gen. Patton's landing of his troops onto the southern beaches. The 505th jump went down in history as the first regimental-size airborne operation by any Army during war.

His success further enhanced Gavin's reputation. In spite of major obstacles from the weather and the enemy, he led his troopers in a series of engagements that helped win the campaign. Many of his men were lost in the heavy fighting and Gavin mourned every one of them. Molded by their commander, they truly were a "band of brothers."

As a result of his actions, Gavin was promoted to brigadier general at the recommendation of Gen. Ridgway. He was made Ridgway's assistant commander of the 82nd. Now at 37, Gavin was the youngest general in the Army since George Armstrong Custer.

Gavin became the commander of the 82nd when Ridgway was promoted to the command of the XVIII Airborne Corps. The young general went on to plan extensively for airborne missions in Normandy and the Netherlands. He participated with his men in the execution of the combat jumps. One of these was a joint assault with British forces, the famous Operation Market Garden. It was also known as "a bridge too far" because it did not go as planned. It was portrayed in a book and movie of the same name.

For his courage and gallantry in extreme combat conditions during the war, Gen. Gavin won many awards. His first was a Distinguished Service Cross, second only to the Medal of Honor. It was recommended by Gen. Ridgway for Gavin's actions in the Sicily invasion. He went on to receive another Distinguished Service Cross as well as two Silver Stars and the Purple Heart. He was also decorated by the British and French governments with some of their highest honors. When the war ended, he had the two stars of a major general and was still only 38 years old.

Gen. Gavin came to my office that day so many years ago to help me with a business contact. The contact was made and I had the meeting I was seeking. But, more importantly for me, I had an opportunity to spend some time with one of our greatest heroes of World War II.

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