

An Interview with Ike

In his first private talk with a correspondent since D-Day, the Commanding General, USFET, speaks his mind on home and wives, army discipline, fraternization and sweating out the occupation.



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FRANKFURT, GERMANY—General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower would like to know when the hell he is going home. He has been overseas more than 30 months, and he would like to have a chance to live a normal life with his wife and family before he gets too old.

The shooting wars are over, and that stirs up the hankering for home and fireside. But the general is stuck with this army of occupation detail and, in his own words, "it's anybody's guess how large the occupation army is going to have to be in Europe and how long it will stick on the job."

That question—How many men and how many months (or years) for the occupation?—was the first thing I asked after a pretty British secretary by the name of Lt. Kay Summersby closed the door from the outside and the general and I were alone in his office.

General Ike's new CP is in a building that is not as big as the Pentagon and only half as complicated. The building was formerly the headquarters of the great I.G. Farbenindustrie outfit. It is shaped like that kind of curved comb the girls wear in their hair, and it has six main wings jutting out from the big arc. The building is six stories high, and there are elevators that keep running all the time, working like the buckets on a dredge. You have to be careful getting on and off to keep from getting chopped in half. The general's office is on the first floor, which in Europe means one flight up from the ground floor. The number is Q3-130.

It is not true that a B-29 will fit inside the general's private office, though probably a B-24 and one or two L-5s might. It's a long walk on a dark rug from the door to the general's desk, giving you the feeling of passing in review. Since there was nobody else in the room—not even General Ike's black scotty, Telek, who is a dead ringer for Fala—and this was supposed to be an informal talk about men in the army, the general held out his hand for a shake, the signal that this was not a time for saluting.

The general made one thing clear right away, before the talk got going. He said there were some things going on in Washington and in his own command that he found out about only through buck slips that run the obstacle course of channels and land in his in-box. Therefore, he said, there were probably some questions that he might not have any answer for right at his fingertips. The size and tour of duty of the occupation force was an example.

"There isn't much I can say on that," he said. "The original estimates were that it would take 400,000 men for the occupation. So far as I know, that figure still stands. That's a lot of men. The number that are needed should be cut down gradually. I can't predict at what rate. It will depend on the success of our program, and that can be measured only by the way the Germans respond."

The figure on the size of the occupation army was worked out by high-powered mathematics involving the number of square miles and number of people living within the American zone. It could probably be broken down to how many square miles and how many Germans each American should have to "occupy," but the general did not mention that anybody has been assigned to do this.

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The general counted off two main reasons why there has to be an army of occupation in the first place. One reason was strictly military. There are property and people to guard, labor gangs to supervise, the possibility of riots or uprisings to put down. The other reason had to do with getting Germany back into shape to take its place in the neighborhood of nations.

His idea is that the biggest job for right now is riding herd on the rehabilitation of Germany's political and economic structure. He believes that the sooner we polish that one off, the quicker we can soft-pedal the strictly military angles.

"We are working toward a government of Germany by the Germans under the supervision of the Allied General Control Council," he said. "This government will pass more and more under German civil control. At first we'll have to look down the Germans' necks in everything they do. Finally, we've got to see to it that the terms of a continuing peace are agreed upon, and that there can be no effective opposition to such a peace. If the Germans show a liberal attitude and a desire to live peacefully, then the necessity for an occupation force starts dying out."

The general said his words at an easy pace, a little faster than in the speeches he has made for the newsreel cameras. He looks straight into your face when he talks, and his voice has that slight gruffness that so many military men have tried to copy.

What he was saying added up to this: some men will go home sooner than others, and who goes and who stays depends on how soon the Germans show that they can keep their noses clean. If the military government men are on top of the ball and get the machinery rolling smoothly, then they can take off. The GIs who are stashed out in monasteries and old castles, or are bivouacking in some plowed field, cleaning their pieces and standing morning inspections, will go home when the Germans can be trusted.

And when that will be, as the general said, is anybody's guess.

That answer covered some reasons for having an occupation force all right, but why Americans? The GIs keep hearing that England and Russia and France are so eager to occupy German territory. Why not let the three of them divvy up the place and take over? Let the Americans go on home.

The general leaned forward over his desk. On one side of him was a cradle phone, made of green plastic. On the other side was a tall green desk lamp whose base was a pair of heavy green dogs with long noses. He took a cigaret out of a small, plain wooden box and lit it with a paper match. Then he got up and started pacing around the room, talking as he walked.

"The war," he said, "is not necessarily over because the last shot has been fired. In order to make sure of the elimination of the evils in Europe that cause war, we feel that our duty extends beyond the cessation of hostilities. The United Nations have a common concept of danger, and they have common obligations. That's why there must be an American occupation force."

He was walking in big arcs around the desk, following the curved shape of the wall, which had big walnut columns separating the tall windows. Through those windows you could look out over the city of Frankfurt and see the snagged ruins that make all German cities look alike today. Most of the time the general keeps long white curtains pulled over the windows.

"The occupation armies are here," he was saying, "not just to police the area. The United Nations want to get positive policies applied. A good example of that is the fraternization question. That problem has gone through three stages.

A woman you see walking down the street is a Nazi? Then we realized that the American temperament couldn't remain that firm. Everybody likes kids. We never think of them as nationals, but as just kids. We eased up the regulations.

"Then it came time to apply positive policies. I believe that the GI is the best ambassador we've got, as long as he understands what we're getting at. The relaxation of non-fraternization, you see, was progressive and continued modification of the policy depends on complete denazification of the Germans and evidence of their desire to live as decent people.

"What has happened in the case of fraterniza-

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tion will happen in other phases of the job here. But it all takes time."

But how long could any individual soldier—some guy, say, with only a couple dozen points—look forward to sweating out the occupation?

Same answer. It's up to the Germans. "It's not possible to say to a man that on Christmas day he will be rotated. That's why we're working on this big program on the Riviera and GI tours here and there. We're trying to make it possible for a soldier to live a little bit of normal life to relieve the irksomeness. It's hard. Hell's fire, I know it's hard."

He was still swinging around the room in a big half-circle, and there was tension in his voice. But it was the tension that comes from earnestness, not from nervousness. He stopped in front of the desk and lighted another cigaret with the paper matches.

"I'm just as bad off as any GI today," he said quietly. "I don't want to be here. I'm 54 years old and I lead a kind of lonely life."

Well, how about wives? Why not bring 'em over?

"We are very sympathetic toward the idea," he said. Some War Department officials are of the opinion that it would be better to bring the men home sooner to their wives, than to keep them overseas and send the wives over. The general considers this a valid line of reasoning, but he and his staff are still exploring shipping space and possible accommodations and the food situation.

"I am chiefly worried," he said, "about the men who may be here longer than others because of the nature of their specialized skills or training." He did not clarify which particular skills or training he meant, but his reference seemed to be to professional officers and 30-year GIs, who will have no trouble getting overseas assignments in peacetime.

Meanwhile, there was the question of improved billets for the men now. Proper housing, he admitted, is one of the most serious problems that has to be licked, for the soldiers as well as for the millions of Germans and DPs who were bombed homeless. "We will take and use whatever is available wherever troops must be concentrated," he said. "I am bound to get a decent living standard for the soldiers." He said this as though he meant it, though he did not expand a definition of decent living standard.

SOME GIs who know for sure that they're going to be stuck with the occupation for a long time have been worried about the possibilities of promotions. They figure that if they have to sweat it out here longer than others, they'd like a little cash reward for their trouble. According to the general, the outlook is not brilliant.

"It's the old T/O story again," he said. "When there's no war on, and whole outfits start getting out of the army, there will no longer be any need for promotions. The T/Os will be shrinking instead of expanding, as they were in the days when we were building up our army."

"Still, every effort will be made to be just and fair. As units demobilize, men of surplus strength must be absorbed. A tech sergeant in X Division, for instance, is not going to get busted to private just because his outfit pulls out and he's not on the same shipping list. It will be up to his officers to find a spot for him, consistent with his skills."

And about discharge priorities by theaters? Will men who have already shipped out of the ETO for the Pacific, for instance, have a better chance of getting out first than the men still here?

It's the points, the general said. If the war had continued in the Pacific, men who shipped there would naturally start getting an advantage in points, because the ETO is fresh out of battle stars and combat decorations. Now that advantage has been whittled down, and when the final discharge details are announced, it will be a matter of ships.

The general was pacing again now. He was on his fourth cigaret. He got a laugh out of the suggestion that GIs who occupy Europe might get so good at it that the army would send them later to occupy Japan. That, he said, he doubted. Presumably, he doubted that GIs would get good at this occupation stuff, and that even if they did they would not get shifted from one theater to another for that purpose.

The general believes in army discipline. He also believes in the things that make soldiers dislike some phases of army discipline.

"I think I know soldiers pretty well," he said. "I talk to them, and they tell me the damndest

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things about the army. The American soldier has initiative and self-reliance, and above all he wants to be independent. Those are the very things that make it hard for him to adjust himself to a lot of the things the army does. But it seems to me that the results of his adaptation to battle discipline are obvious."

There could be no disagreeing with that—not with a window in front of you looking out over the city of Frankfurt. The general's tone did seem to point up the term "battle discipline," as distinguished from ordinary "army discipline," though that may have been wishful thinking.

"I think the American soldier," he continued, "wants some assurance of a social and economic life in which he can make a good living and raise a family. That is part of the reason we are here."

Also, he said, and he broke into a grin, there is going to be an Army of Occupation medal for those who place importance on such things. The medal has been designed, but nobody knows when it will be issued. It won't be worth any points. Perhaps a little gold question mark will be authorized to be worn on the ribbon, and that won't be worth any points either.

General Ike himself has a dress uniform on which he wears 17 ribbons and a potful of stars and clusters in six rows across the chest. In the office, however, he had on an Eisenhower jacket with only three rows of ribbons. He wore his five overseas stripes, too. Five stars and five Hershey bars are a rare combination. Most generals either shipped out later or got home oftener.

Ike is a man who thinks a lot about going home. He got a trip to the States last June, and he made a big hit in Abilene, Kansas, when he said: "I want to speak of a barefoot boy. Frequently he sees himself as a policeman or a locomotive engineer. But always in his dreams he is coming home to a welcome from his own home town."

I asked him how it felt to get back with his family for a little while.

"Gad," he said. "After we were done with all the official receptions, I had a few days—only a few days—with my family. That was the closest thing to a furlough that I've had in more than two years. I sure wanted to spread it out for a few weeks."

Somehow, the whole thing sounded familiar.

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