

AIRBORNE

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WITH THE 82D AIRBORNE DIVISION—Major Gen. James M. Gavin, the one-time private who now commands the 82 Airborne Division, was talking about his boyhood and how he came to join the Army.

"The hell of it was, I could never stay out of trouble," he said.

Stories about generals don't usually start out this way; but generals don't usually start out like Gavin.

Veteran parachutists who have been with Gavin through the airborne invasions in Sicily, Italy, France and Holland say that "Slin Jim," as they call their 37-year-old CO, actually joined the Army because a juvenile court judge let him choose between becoming a soldier or serving six months at hard labor.

Gavin laughs at this story and others that his men tell and denies them.

"I've been accused of using the Army as a dodge from every charge from arson to kidnapping," he said. "I just wanted to get into a uniform when I was a kid, and playing soldiers was my favorite game. But it sometimes got me into trouble."

Nonetheless, Gavin admits to being the tactician and leader of a gang that "played soldier" by making raids on such places as Mr. Heigle's fruit stand in his home town of Mount Carmel, Pa. He also acknowledges that at least one such raid ended in disaster and resulted in his meeting a judge.

Whether or not he put in other appearances before the same judge—as is contended—is obscure, but it is an agreed-upon fact that it took Gavin until he was almost 17 to graduate from grade school. Apparently times were tough in Mount Carmel then, and Gavin had to work his way through the last few years of grade school.

At 17, he juggled his age a little and entered the Army on April 1, 1924; in a few months he had made Pfc. and by November won corporal stripes.

At this point Gavin passed his examination for West Point, but prior to entering the academy he had to bull his way through what was a "refresher course" to other students. The subjects of algebra, geometry, and rhetoric represented "a maze of premeditated obstacles," he explained. Somehow he made it, and subsequently was graduated from the Point in the class of '29.

"Not with flying colors," he said, "but I had established a bridgehead, anyway."

Gavin made the usual peacetime tour of Army posts, and about the only thing that seems to have distinguished him from the others who outranked him was his conviction that a new kind of soldier—the parachutist—could play a big role in a new type of war. The idea got little comfort from those among the brass who were still trying to fit airplanes into their conception of military strategy; parachutists to them were strictly out of this world stuff.

The way to a general's stars, as any Regular Army sergeant will tell you, is to keep your mouth shut and your body healthy. Gavin defied the first part of the formula by not only talking about parachutists but writing Washington about them—through channels.

LEAVING a comfortable instructor's job at West Point to go through "jump school" at Fort Benning, Gavin eventually wound up as G-3 of the newly organized Airborne Command. From this post he continually pressed for the abandonment of the idea that parachute units had to be limited to battalions, urging, instead, their organization by regiments. He assisted in drafting the first suggested T/O for such a regiment.

The T/O bucked around WD channels for about six months but eventually got into the hands of men who knew a good idea when they saw one. In September of 1942, Gavin was presented with a pair of eagles and given command of the first parachute regiment to be organized from scratch.

The parachutists who came to fill up Gavin's regiment considered themselves GIs of a special breed.

Gavin, not having any silver spoons in his mouth, spoke his men's language, and tried to

General Gavin

do everything he asked of them better than they.

He still likes to tell about the time when he halted the regiment for a 10-minute break after an overnight training problem followed by a forced march.

"I had hardly hit the ground," he recalled, "when I was asleep. When I woke up 35 minutes later, there was the entire regiment stretched out on the road behind me as far as I could see. And every man was sound asleep."

During the regiment's training period there were still some dubious brass hats, not to mention some civic spokesmen, who deplored the parachutists and the war that seemed to be always raging around them in southern taverns. Gavin backed up his men and bided his time.

A year later in Africa, Gavin referred to the days of the tavern forays when he made a speech from an empty beer keg just before the jump-off for Sicily. He spoke at the regiment's first birthday party held near the smelly Moslem burying ground at Kairouan, and as a prelude to his speech he dismissed all the officers.

Gavin told his men that the only battles that they had to their credit so far had taken place in beer halls. In the fight coming up, he said, they would have a chance to prove that they were soldiers who could close with Germans and kill them. They could, also prove, he concluded, the point that he had believed a long time—that parachutists could play a decisive part in an invasion. Then he sat around and had a bull session until early morning.

By this time Gavin's 505th Regiment was a part of the 82d Airborne under Maj. Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway, a man whose confidence in airborne troops had led to his appointment as divisional commander.

When the 82d blazed the way for the invasion into Sicily, Gavin led his men, jumping in the number one position of the first plane of his serial—the same spot he was to jump from in three more invasions still to come.

A story that 82d men like to tell about Gavin in Sicily involves a handful of his parachutists who tried from 1100 hours to nearly 1700 to oust dug-in Jerries from a vineyard. The enemy had superiority in men and guns, and each time the parachutists charged they were beaten off, leaving casualties before the German position. In such a situation, tired, shell-shaken soldiers hate to hear the order for another attack, necessary as it may be.

Gavin, sharing his men's mood, didn't try to move them forward with melodrama or profanity. He said:

"At 1700 hours we're going forward and pick up our dead and wounded."

Gavin's men took the position.

According to Gavin's Form 66, he was awarded a DSC and a Purple Heart in Sicily, made a brigadier general in Italy, earned a cluster for his DSC in Normandy, won a Silver Star and the British DSO at Nijmegen Bridge, and was promoted to Major General in Holland on Oct. 21, 1944.

Few of Gavin's men remember or care about the specific actions for which he won his fruit salad and promotions. The thing that is important as far as the parachutists are concerned is that "Slim Jim" never takes a break that they don't get, and never sends a man on a mission where he won't go himself.

For one thing, a mess orderly's ingenuity is wasted on the General. Once in Italy his orderly got hold of some ten-in-one rations at a time when the men were eating "Ks." Far from being pleased with the change in chow, Gavin told his orderly that henceforth he would eat what the men ate. The same situation prevails about sleeping. Even if the division CP is inside a house, Gavin disdains a bed but sleeps on the floor in his sleeping bag on the theory that if his men can get along without beds he can too.

The 82d men saw a lot of "Slim Jim" in the confused, bitter fighting that followed Von Rundstedt's breakthrough. During an artillery barrage he ran out into the open, applied a tourniquet to the shattered leg of a staff sergeant, and then gave the sergeant morphine.

After the Sicily campaign, in which the 82d captured 22,000 prisoners, Gavin and his men made their next combat jump onto the Salerno Beachhead near the mouth of the Sele River in Italy. During the fluid situation that first prevailed on the beachhead, Gavin sent a company of men out into enemy territory. When they didn't report back, Gavin took a patrol and traveled 10 miles past our lines to find them. His men were a little mortified at "Slim Jim" being worried about them.

In Normandy, Gavin, then a brigadier,

General Gavin

dropped behind enemy lines with his men on D-Day, where the 82d again repeated its mission of cutting enemy supply and communication lines. It was the 82d which slashed across the Merderet and Douve Rivers and set the stage for cutting off the Cotentin Peninsula and sealing the doom of Cherbourg. The parachutists fought for 33 days without relief or reinforcements.

MUCH was written and said through press and radio about the 82d's role in the airborne attack that seized and held briefly the Nijmegen bridge between Holland and Germany. But what Gavin remembers most about the battle was the trouble he had in rescuing some of his parachutists who were apparently hopelessly cut off across the Waal river.

"I break out in a cold sweat every time I think of that river crossing," Gavin said.

Military men would call crossing a river in the face of enemy fire while you are being attacked on both flanks a "calculated risk." The cut-off parachutists that Gavin got to with such tactics simply say, "Slim Jim took a chance and made it."

After Nijmegen came the Ardennes and the 82d, its deeds unpublicized because of a security stop, hammered eight miles to the Salm River to rescue three American divisions that had been cut off. Then the 82d held the line as the other divisions moved back to a prepared position. During this period Cpl. D. C. Gabriel of Richmond, Calif., crossed the river on a reconnaissance of enemy-held territory. Seeing a tall figure up ahead, the corporal moved up slowly to investigate.

"Hello, Gabriel," said Gavin, when the corporal got to him. "Getting any information?"



Maj. Gen. Gavin

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