

OMAR BRADLEY

Doughboy's General

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The field commander of the American ground forces is a "quiet operator" with a big punch — and his men swear by him

IN MARCH 1943, when a newly arrived major general named Omar Nelson Bradley was breaking in as deputy commander of the American Second Corps in Tunisia, one of his aides said to me: "A year from now, you'll see Bradley with three stars and a high field command."

You expect an aide to think highly of his general, so I merely grinned. Later that day I encountered Bradley getting shot at up Maknassy way. I saw a man just short of six feet, long-legged and lanky, wearing GI field shoes, trousers and leggings and an old field jacket. Only the stars on his weather-beaten helmet revealed his rank. His face was lined and rough-hewn with a Lincolnian homeliness; and his steady gray eyes stared out mildly through horn-rimmed spectacles. His high-pitched voice had a Missouri drawl and was so gently polite you failed to suspect the steely quality it could take on.

My estimate of Bradley then was that he was a nice guy but lacked the "color" that great generals are supposed to have.

But, curiously enough, this quiet, schoolteacherish general is more spectacular as a tactician than Britain's flamboyant "Monty." By mid-April Omar Bradley was commanding the Second Corps. By July he was a lieutenant general. By August the legends of his tactical skill were everywhere, and thousands of officers and men were singing his praises. And finally General Eisenhower named him senior commander of American ground forces in the impending invasion.

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The general was born in 1893 at Clark, Missouri. His father was a schoolteacher who imbued his son with a love of tramping the outdoors with dog and gun. He died when the boy was 13, and a friend suggested West Point as the best bet for a poor boy ambitious for an education. Bradley graduated in 1915, 44th in his class of 164, of whom 30 have become generals — Dwight Eisenhower, standing 61st, was one of them.

Bradley was crack outfielder on a baseball team that produced eight generals. He still shares the GI's enthusiasm for baseball — never misses a game if he can help it. But he said he was glad the World Series ended so quickly last fall, so the troops could get their minds back on the war. That, rather than generalship, he said gravely, explained why we cleaned up Sicily so quickly.

The class prophet at the Point noted that Bradley's "most prominent characteristic was 'getting there.'" Bradley went into the infantry and now at last he is "getting there" — but it took him more than 25 years of hard plugging. "I've done every kind of job there is to do in the Army," he says, and "I've spent 25 years trying to explain why I wasn't overseas in the last war. Thank goodness I'll be spared that this time." When the second world war began he had never heard a shot fired in battle. Plenty of other officers had combat experience, and he expected they'd be chosen over him.

Actually Omar Bradley was a marked man. In his teaching he had shown mastery of strategy and tactics that was bound to lead to a high command. In 1941 General Marshall jumped Bradley to brigadier general and gave him the job of expanding the little Fort Benning Infantry School to a tremendous institution that trained 14,000 officer candidates at a time. Bradley did a magnificent job. And had a wonderful time to boot because the hunting was swell. Often as not, his shooting companion would be some enlisted man.

The Army was beginning to note he had fine qualities of leadership. In February 1942, Bradley was made a major general and assigned to organize our first air-borne division, the 82nd.

Chosen over dozens his senior in service, he was sent to North Africa in February 1943 as deputy to General Patton. In May he succeeded Patton. On several critical occasions his tactical skill and remarkable sense of timing surprised the Germans and soundly defeated them. One of his favorite maxims is: "Hit the enemy twice: first, to find out what he's got; then, to take it away from him."

In April it was decided to move Bradley's Second Corps from south-

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ern Tunisia 200 miles to the north for a surprise attack. To move 50,000 men, 10,000 vehicles and enormous supplies is a problem at any time. This time the corps would have to move at night to hide from enemy planes, and even then risk discovery by flares. The roads Bradley had to use cut squarely across the east-west roads supplying the British First Army then slugging it out with Von Arnim. If Bradley's vehicles blocked these roads for even a few hours, the result might be critical.

Bradley timed it to the split second; the enemy never caught on, and the flow of material to the British was not interrupted. Before the complicated maneuver started, Bradley was frequently seen explaining the project to junior officers and enlisted men, drawing plans with a twig in the sand. It is Bradley's idea that in an army as many people as possible should know what is going on.

In his surprise attack from the new position, his tactics were unorthodox. Instead of fighting his way up the valleys, the natural routes where there were roads (and likewise Germans), Bradley worked his forces along the high ridges. It was such difficult going that the Germans never thought anybody would try it, and they were caught napping again and again. "Attacking along the ridges," said Bradley in his official report to General Marshall, "presented tremendous difficulties in supply but materially reduced the number of casualties and in the end proved to be the quickest means of outflanking the enemy." Within six weeks Bradley gave the Germans a second jolt. The key to their defense of Bizerte was stony, sullen Hill 609, a 2000-foot peak dominating the country for miles around. It was garrisoned with crack troops of the Hermann Göring Division, and protected on the flank by the Barenthin parachute regiment. (The latter, some of Germany's best troops, fought on until only two were left.)

Our 34th Division tried to storm 609 and was hurled back. On the right the First Division tried to advance and was stopped. The First Armored Division, back in the valleys, couldn't come on until this peak had been seized. Bradley made a survey of the situation in his jeep. Then he spent hours studying his maps.

He knew that the Germans had pulled most of their anti-tank guns south to meet the British threat. It was not tank country, but Bradley sent ten American Shermans around behind 609, athwart the defenders' supply lines, timing the thrust to coincide with an attack by the 34th. The fighting was savage; but 609 fell. Then the First Armored crashed through, and seven days later the

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whole German army collapsed. Large segments, cut off by Bradley's tactics, surrendered: his "mousetrap," as he called it, caught 37,000 prisoners.

"This ends operations for the U. S. II Corps in North Africa," is the complete text of General Bradley's final order. His chiefs had more to say. In the citation they sent with the Distinguished Service Medal they mentioned Bradley's "sound judgment, superior tactical skill, cool courage," and concluded, "The outstanding success of the operation was largely due to his personality and efforts."

Few victories of such magnitude have ever been won with so little loss of life (351 Americans, 70 French). That's why Bradley is called "the doughboy's general." One reason for the low death rate was that the general pushed the first-aid stations and the evacuation hospitals closer to the front than any general ever had before. That not only saved lives, but it was wonderful for morale.

"It's been a gentleman's war with you Americans," said captured German generals in North Africa. But Bradley did not reciprocate the sentiment. Indignantly he has told how the Germans planted mines where they could kill nobody but civilians and how they planted booby traps among our dead. "Don't think they're an honorable enemy," he said. "They're sly and treacherous." Bradley's dusty jeep, with its three white stars on the bumper, is a familiar sight up front where the shooting is. As the GI's put it, "He's always out at the point of the wedge." And his headquarters — usually a tent or a trailer — is closer to the front than might seem wise for a general.

Bradley has had some narrow escapes. In Africa an aide was killed at his side and bomb fragments hit the carbine Bradley was carrying. On another occasion, he advanced a little too far and a sniper took a shot at him. His sergeant-driver hastily stopped the car and Bradley began stalking the sniper with his carbine. The sniper escaped, but the story got around of the general failing in his one chance to bag a German. The Army enjoyed it especially because Bradley prides himself on being a crack shot. Back at Fort Benning, his before-breakfast target practice used to be to go into the swamp and shoot the heads off a dozen water moccasins. That's shooting!

Bradley is invariably polite and considerate. "I've never known a strong man who found it necessary to raise his voice," he says. He's the only general I ever heard say "excuse me" to a corporal. He was, however, once heard to swear. He was interrogating a captured German officer when an aide accidentally discharged

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a rifle; the bullet whizzed past Bradley's ear. Bradley snapped, "Be more careful with that damned thing — please!"

Once, spending the night in the field, the general asked for a shovel to level a place for his cot. An aide offered to do the job. Bradley said: "I'm going to sleep here, not you," and got to work with the shovel. Now, in London, he waves aside junior officers who leap for his bag: "Let be — I've been carrying this thing for years."

He is what the soldiers call "a quiet operator." A corporal came to Bradley, complaining that his sergeant stripes were overdue. The general asked him a number of questions about army regulations which the corporal found hard to answer. Then Bradley called in a sergeant, asked him the same questions and got the correct replies. The corporal went away realizing he hadn't yet earned that extra stripe.

The general has two vices — Coca-Cola and ice cream. He can consume more of each in a day than anybody else in the Army. His poker and bridge are not vices at all; they are valuable assets, as opponents learned long ago.

Ernie Pyle remarked that he could never be a general and make decisions that spent the lives of men. General Bradley fell silent a moment. "You don't sleep so well over it," he confessed. "And it's probably harder on some of the younger officers than it is on me. After all, I've been conditioning my mind for more than 25 years to be able to send men to possible death, and not go crazy."

The GI's know that if he sends them it's necessary. They swear by him. "Honest and simple," they say. "When he goes into a huddle with himself, he's thinking how to make it easier for us."

And they found out long ago that he has what it takes.

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