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General Ben Lear

Hotel Peabody

Memphis, Tennessee

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Interview with Gen. Ben Lear at Memphis, Tennessee, May 9, 1957, by Forrest C. Pogue.

(General Lear commanded Second Army under General Marshall. While he was on terminal leave he was called to Washington as head Army Ground Forces for a short time while Gen McNair was covering from a wound received in North Africa—this in 1943. Then he served on the Craig Board. In the summer of 1944 when McNair was killed, Lear became commander of the army ground Force. He was replaced by Stilwell and then he was sent to Europe to serve as deputy theater commander to General Eisenhower.)

I did not know General Marshall in the Philippines although we both served there. I first saw him at Ft Riley after world I when Marshall came there with Pershing.

Marshall was recognized before World War I because of his work during maneuvers in Luzon (Lear thought it was in Marshall's first tour. Actually was later. He was just a lieutenant however.) This was written up by Johnson Hagood. See Sat Eve Post. He was later selected to go to the School of the Line much ahead of his time. Older officer usually got detailed. (Talk to Krueger about him).

(Lear here got off on capture of Aguinaldo. Was captured through ruse. Americans under Funston pretended to be captured. Came in with Philippine scout. When they got in, they seize Aguinaldo.)

We switched back to World War II. Lear said Gen. Marshall made sure we got the lesson of North Africa and saw that McNair got the word to us. I talked to 2000 sergeants once about lessons which were learned and their eyes bulged out.

General Lear spoke, at my urging, of the School of the Citizen Soldier. Gave the chief credit for this to Col. Allen Griffin who came to see him and proposed the school and a manual. Got expert help. War prevented full use of it.

Selection of Marshall was Chief of Staff. Said Marshall an old friend of Craig's. Undoubtedly he was responsible for Marshall's appointment. We always spoke highly of Marshall. Marshall made a trip to army installation shortly before he took over as Chief of Staff. We came to Panama and inspected our AA units. He wanted to know about our equipments and what we were doing. He went out and saw. He became enlighten as to what we had and what we were trying to do. The boss at the canal--Stone--was vitally interested in its defiance and was constantly asking for more help. Marshall did send 2 extra regiments for Panama.

The Atlantic meeting took us into war. Marshall wanted to be sure that we were ready to fight.

You can tell what Eisenhower thought of Marshall if you read some of his message. He always called Marshall "the Boss."

I never knew of any feud between Marshall and MacArthur between the wars. Never heard it discussed.

When my retirement time came, Marshall asked if there wasn't some other job I could do. Put me on aboard. Later when he had to take care of Stilwell, he saw I was taken care of.

Marshall is man who demands that things be done properly, but he tried to arrange it so that people won't be unnecessarily injured. He told you what he wanted done and let you do it. I had no quarrels with the War Dept. and the commander of the Ground Forces when I was in Second Army. Several things had to be approved. Some of them were disapproved but Gen Marshall always had a reason for disapproving.

He never had many close friends. He was a man who never played polo or golf. He usually rode alone there was one fellow he rode with--a man who went to Sweden--retired as a colonel--Hunkel I believe). At the Infantry School Marshall knew a lot of people well and they liked him.

When I came from Panama in 1940 and was appointed to be commander of Second Army, I didn't go to Washington to see the Chief of Staff. I didn't know him well enough and thought he would resent it. After I was in Chicago about a week, he sent for me. In Washington he asked me who my Chief of Staff was. I said I don't have one. He suggested a man-- a classmate of MacArthur's (confidentially it was US Grant III). I said he is all right, but I am not sure that it will do, because I am not a West Pointer. So he said all right and let me pick someone else.

When I went to Second Army I found that in the various units only about one-fourth of the companies had day rooms. I asked Gen Moore (G-4). He checked with Gen Marshall. Marshall thought about it and said every regiment has a chapel; let every company have a day room. Said we got them.

Gen Marshall made many trips to camps. Hasty but as many as possible. Little ceremony about them. Never let this interfere with work of the commander. He came to Louisiana during maneuvers. Consulted on both sides and didn't interfere (See Krueger).

There may have been a little ill feeling between Drum and Marshall. If so, it was Drum's fault. He was ambitious and wanted to be Chief of Staff.

At Antwerp, Marshall came over and said push ahead on that deal.

While I was at Second Army, General Marshall gave me the idea that he had confidence in me and expected me to make good soldiers. I had had a lot of training experience. I had the Cavalry Division and later on ground forces in Panama. He knew that I had built two regimental cantonments in Panama. I think he was satisfied with that. Fact that he knew Craig so well may have been a point. When I retired for age, Craig or Marshall put me on the Craig Board.

Terry Allen and Marshall judging from what Terry told me were close friends. When Allen had to be withdrawn from Italy because he was letting his division gets out of hand, Marshall gave him another division and he made good in Germany. (See Terry Allen in El Paso).

(Lear somewhere along here mentioned the fact that he had come up through the ranks. Said he hadn't found it a handicap except that he had to work awfully hard. He laughingly said: Of

course, I was not a great general. He said in 1901 he went to Officers Garrison School with three West Pointers. Two West Pointers failed but I didn't).

Marshall would plan, but would work through McNair. He would say how is such and such an outfit doing. He called about the 97th I remember. It was always pleasant when you could give him a good report. Eichelberger was commander and making a nice start. Marshall was interested in the quality of the cadre.

I recall the problem of the 27th Infantry Division. Filled with a lot of new men. Lot of men in the middle 30s. Too old to start soldiering as privates. Marshall was concerned over forced marches. McNair required 25 mile march in a certain time and a five mile march in an hour. Very severe. Marshall wanted to know about it. It so happened that one division from Illinois didn't do well and I had to stop it after the second mile. Marshall said don't start quite so soon after the long hike.

Marshall was pleasantly annoyed when I raised a little hell at Infantry School because they said that only the man at the head of scouts could fire at the enemy. I said any scout could shoot if he could see the enemy.

Rangers--I went to West Coast and saw the training of marines. Their whole attitude was fine. I went back and told the G-3 that he would start a Ranger School. McNair said the school was started without authority. Said it had to be cancelled. He was right and I apologized and was allowed to go ahead with what I had. I had no intention of draining off elite. My idea was to train and officer and noncom from each unit and return them to give this training to everybody.

I had to get after some of the National Guard commanders. One of them was Maj. Gen. Truman, cousin of the Senator. The Senator didn't hurt me but tip got at me through Champ Clark. I was willing to keep the commander, but after his relief he got drunk and came in and said he was resigning.

When Stilwell was relieved, Marshall naturally wanted something for him befitting a senior general. So he decided to give him my job head of Army Ground Forces. Marshall sent Handy to talk to me. I was mad and blew up. Marshall didn't have to find me a place, but he did. He wanted conditions improved in the rear areas. He understood that Eisenhower would give me a free hand. I had only one contact with Gen Marshall's office after I got over there. It was a letter from Gen Handy on clearing up the camps for troops going home. I corrected it. So far as I know General Marshall didn't know about it. I never even talked to Eisenhower about it.

Marshall was the big man of the war. I am giving you an excerpt from a speech I made about him.

Somewhere in here, Gen Lear mentioned the fact that he tried to inspect camps a great deal. Told of visiting one camp and found no one who knew how to report. My aide--Snowden--used to bet me a nickel that they wouldn't report right and won a lot of nickels. At one place the division commander kept telling the cook out of the corner of his mouth to report. The man came up--

saluted incorrectly and finally blurted out--I like it here. I should have bawled him out, but you have to be human. I said "I am glad you do."

I gathered that Lear was no MacArthur fan, but he praised his abilities. (I told him of Colonel Patterson's story that while he was in the Army historical section while MacArthur was chief of staff, an order had come from the Chief of Staff's office to make clear that MacArthur was commander of the 42nd division before the war ended. Patterson's story was that orally MacArthur was told he was to have command--this on Nov 9--but the order did not come until the 12th or 13th but that his office had the Order of Battle to show him commanding as of the 9th. Patterson always spoke of this as History by Command). I gather that Lear felt that MacArthur had used influence to keep his general's rank after the war. He noted that lots of people couldn't get along with him and said that Eisenhower apparently had decided that he couldn't.

(Given to me by Gen Ben Lear--Statement by Gen Lear to a Memphis Civic club)

I am sorry that I did not know Gen Marshall more intimately. Our relationships were most of an official character. In the early days of our service he was in one branch -- Infantry -- and I in another - Cavalry - so our paths did not often cross. I do know that he was selfless in all his actions; he had a job to do and I believe that he felt his reward would be in doing all things well. He was responsible for the organization and training of the largest army that the United States has ever possessed. Both were difficult tasks. He sought efficiency yet tried to avoid hurting the individual. He early saw the need for young as well as capable division commanders. He was very largely responsible for our strategic plans. Think what you will about the wisdom of invading through the Balkans. Possibly that was political decision that should have been made. Who knows, and I am not guessing. But military strategy clearly pointed to the crossing of the English Channel operations. General Marshall, in my opinion, was the greatest American of our country during the years of World War II.