

Address to the 100th Infantry Division Association
BG Charles F. Brower
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Mr. Tillett, Mr. Bourne, Mr. Fair, Officers and Directors of the 100th Infantry Division Association, Mr. Minor, and most importantly, Centurymen, families, and friends of the 100th Infantry Division.

Thank you for that warm and generous welcome. It touches and embarrasses me, as I am truly honored to have been invited by the famous Centurymen to speak at their 2006 reunion.

I am a career soldier who served thirty-two years on active duty; an historian who has studied and written about strategy, operations and leadership in combat—and taught those subjects to hundreds of cadets from West Point and VMI; and an adoring son of a World War II pilot in the Army Air Force and career officer who flew in combat in three wars—like you, a member of the “Greatest Generation.”

Studying World War II has come to define an essential part of who I am.

It has been more than sixty years since you ejected the *Wehrmacht's* Army Group G in six weeks from a Vosges Mountain defense line that Hitler had ordered held until April 1945 (over steep, heavily forested terrain that no invading army had successfully attacked in the annals of military history, I might add) and pierced the former Maginot Line at Bitche to begin the final liberation of Europe. Yet I cannot avoid been stirred again by that great crusade and by the generation that committed itself so completely to the defeat of the Axis powers.

Those veterans may be slower now and the spring in their step that once carried them from Normandy to the Elbe and from Marseilles to Stuttgart is for the most part gone.

Sometimes they are only recognizable by campaign ribbons, baseball caps and windbreakers now serving as proud badges of units past.

But when they were young they were the soldiers of democracy, prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for a better world.

Inscribe upon the memorial chapel at the American Cemetery overlooking Omaha Beach are these most fitting words capturing your generation's essence: “Think not only upon their passing. Remember the glory of their spirit.”

On 6 June 1984 I accompanied President Ronald Reagan to a lonely windswept promontory on the Normandy coast where he honored the men of the 2nd Ranger Battalion who captured Pointe du Hoc. It was for me a powerfully poignant experience—one that indelibly impressed upon me the debt that our nation (and the world) owes to you and your fellow soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines.

Listen to what the President said about those men, in words now listed as one of the Great Communicator's three most unforgettable speeches:

“These are the men who took the cliffs.

These are the champions who helped free a continent.

These are the heroes who helped win a war.”

Immediately following these oft-quoted sentences, the President went on to make a much more important point—a point I strongly believe that the Rangers of Pointe du Hoc would have insisted he make, had he not included them.

The President then emphasized that “all these Rangers were part of a roll call of honor with names that spoke of a pride as bright as the regimental colors they bore.” Standing on the Norman coast, the units he listed appropriately reflected that campaign—Screaming Eagles of Sainte Mere Eglise, the Stonewall Brigade of the 29th Division, the Royal Winnipeg Rifles, the Ox and Bucks of Pegasus Bridge.

But rhetorically the point he made was grander—and on that level the list must include the Centurymen of the 100th Infantry Division.

Strengthened by your generation's collective courage, heartened by your valor, and borne by your memory, this nation has been emboldened for over six decades to continue to stand for the ideals for which your generation lived and died.

I salute you.

I want to talk to you this evening about the remarkable soldier who commanded your division through the war, giving particular attention to his ideas on leadership and leader development. I have been extremely fortunate that these past six years I have had the honor to serve as the Deputy Superintendent and Dean of Faculty at the Virginia Military Institute, a treasure of the Nation and the Commonwealth entrusted with the education and development of leaders of character who are prepared to serve the common defense as citizen-soldiers. Your commanding general was a graduate of the Institute, a product of that remarkable crucible whose citizen-soldier graduates have served the nation so grandly for 166 years. World War II was the most significant test of the American citizen-soldier in our history, and it proved to be one that was passed with high marks.

As I prepared for these remarks tonight, I was fortunate that my good friend John Adams, VMI Class of 1971, made available to me some very interesting materials from the Burress papers that he had discovered in the Center for Military History at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. I am indebted to John for the use of those materials and know that the history of the 100th Division and General Burress that he's writing will fill an important gap in the historiography of the European Theater of Operations in World War II.

As I read those materials and revisited other key works, including ones by Keith Bonn, Peter Mansoor and your own remarkably good *The Story of the Century*, I grew increasingly intrigued by Major General Withers A. Burress and the role he played in preparing the 100th Infantry Division for the hard fighting that it would face across formidable terrain and in punishing weather conditions.

For a while since the war it was fashionable among military historians to emphasize the operational and tactical brilliance of the *Wehrmacht*. Many historians during those years argued that the Allied victory was principally the result of overwhelming weight of American materiel, thrown at the Germans in a relatively unskilled manner.

Their story was one in which the more combat-effective German army in the end was bulldozed by less capable, but more numerous enemies.

You probably aren't surprised to learn that this was also the defeated German army's explanation for their defeat.

But a basic methodological maxim—as a researcher, student or in life, in general—is that the truest test of an hypothesis is to confront the contradictory evidence. For example, it's a relatively easy task to assemble evidence in support of the proposition that it's always light outside—all you have to do is to collect your evidence only during hours of daylight. The real challenge to that thesis is to explain the contradictory evidence—the eight hours of darkness.

And so it is with the argument that Allied numerical and material advantage overwhelmed a more combat effective *Wehrmacht*.

In fact, the evidence shows that the relative quality of forces fielded by Allies and Axis in World War II was crucial to the ultimate outcome. It also shows that the combat effectiveness of the opposing forces changed over time right up to VE Day, with German combat effectiveness steadily decreasing as casualties grew and resources declined and with Allied combat effectiveness steadily increasing over the same period.

The reasons for the German decline are less difficult to grasp; less is known about the reasons for the increase in Allied combat effectiveness.

What do we mean by the term, “combat effectiveness”?

Colonel Peter Mansoor, a distinguished armor officer and author of *The GI Offensive in Europe: The Triumph of American Infantry Divisions, 1941-1945*, offers the best definition. “Combat effectiveness,” he says, “is the ability of a military organization to achieve its assigned missions with the least expenditure of resources (both material and human) in the shortest amount of time.”

Mansoor argues that combat effectiveness involves three elements--human factors, organizational and technical components, and the element of endurance, the ability of a military force to sustain its effort over time. Human factors are the least easily quantifiable, but often most critical—involving leadership, discipline, morale, and cohesion. Without these elements units disintegrate under stress and cannot accomplish the difficult tasks involved in closing with and destroying the enemy.

I want to concentrate tonight on one of these human factors of military effectiveness, focusing on the leadership of Major General Withers A. Burress.

Who was this remarkable soldier who in his later years liked to refer to himself simply as “just an old doughboy?” In the Burress papers at the Center for Military History you can find an officer’s notes from remarks at a farewell dinner for General Burress as he turned over command of VII Corps in 1951, notes providing a humorous but insightful introduction:

We remember Withers A. (Pinkey) Burress as a soldier, statesman, dog fancier, sportsman, raconteur, and a judge of good whiskey. A hunter and a fisherman of some note, he is a Virginia gentleman—smooth, mellow, mild, fully aged, and 100 Proof.

So what do we know about this “Virginia gentleman” and general and how does it illuminate his leadership and command of the 100th Infantry Division?

Born in 1894 and raised in Richmond, he spent a comfortable, upper middle class boyhood combining the pursuit of what he would later call “book learning”(those who knew him described him as bright and a good student, a voracious reader always interested in ideas) with hunting, fishing, horseback riding and other manly outdoor sports.

His mother’s strong interest in the military heritage of her family, which stretched back to the American Revolution and involved relatives who served both as Colonial and Confederate officers, apparently impressed young Burress mightily. “The stories of the feats of Confederate arms found a lasting place in my memory,” he recalled at the end of his career. “While in the natural course of life many youthful ideals have crumbled, I have never had occasion to abandon my admiration of the Confederate soldier.”

These ideals, his mother’s steady guiding hand, and financial exigency resulting from his father’s serious illness led him to Lexington and the Virginia Military Institute, where he matriculated at the age of 15 in 1910. (His father would die shortly thereafter during his Rat Year.)

His VMI entrance physical describes him as a healthy young man, 5’9” tall and 165 pounds. It didn’t describe his most striking physical characteristics, however—piercing blue eyes and light skin coloration, almost alabaster in tone, that was “a little” (his characterization) or extensively (everyone else’s description) freckled, and topped with a crop of reddish-orange hair.

Roomed with another red-headed Rat his first day at VMI, an upper classman entered the room, took one look, pointed to the other, and said, “You are Red.” Turning to Burress, he continued, “You are Pinkey.” The nickname stuck. For the rest of his military career, he would dutifully list “Pinkey” when asked on official forms for other names or aliases.

The VMI experience was a good one for him. A thoughtful and serious student, Pinky Burress graduated as a civil engineer in the Class of 1914, having played football for four years (the last two on the varsity), and advancing through the cadet ranks to lieutenant by his First Class year. Under his stern

visage in *The Bomb*, VMI's yearbook (he served as its managing editor), we find a Brother Rat at once affectionately kidding him about his luminously white complexion, while at the same time presciently forecasting his brilliant future. "Put on your smoked glasses and take a long look at this headlight," he wrote. "May Pinkey be as much of a shining light in after life as he has been during his cadetship."

There were few commissions in the American army available in 1914; it wasn't until November 1916 that Burress was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant of Infantry and brought onto active duty and service on the Mexican border with the 23rd Infantry Regiment.

Following the American declaration of war against Germany he shipped to France in 1918 with that regiment as part of the 2nd Infantry Division and participated in heavy action at Chateau Thierry, Soissons, and at St. Mihiel. He remained in Europe for a year after Armistice Day as part of the Occupation, returning in 1919 to Fort Benning for further service with the 29th Infantry Regiment.

That regiment's mission was to provide troops in support of training at the US Army's Infantry School. Burress would spend three years there with the 29th Regiment--refining his tactical and leadership skills and sharpening the tools of an emerging military professional.

This was the first of several formative military schoolhouse assignments for him—assignments that he carefully exploited to full professional advantage. Historians have noted that in the long, sometimes desperate interwar years, most of the key officers that would emerge in World War II to train and lead to victory the great armies that vanquished Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan quietly honed their skills in and on the faculty's of the US Army's military education program. It was while at the Infantry Advanced Course in 1929 that Burress was first identified as a promising, up and coming officer by the Infantry School's Assistant Commandant, Colonel George C. Marshall.

Cited as "a thinking officer," Burress was selected for the two-year Command and General Staff College course at Fort Leavenworth, reserved for the most promising officers and viewed by the Army as a kind of developmental incubator, an example of the Army's wise interwar investment in its human capital.

After graduation in 1931, he was retained as an instructor at the staff college for three years—the interwar Army placed its best officers in teaching roles, believing that nothing better stimulated creative thinking about the profession of arms. Service on the Leavenworth faculty was followed immediately by a posting at the Army's premier educational institution, the Army War College.

Officers with the kind of extensive formal military education being invested in Burress were being groomed for high-level staff assignments or command of a major organization. This visionary investment would deliver valuable dividends in the leadership of the 90 division army of World War II.

While in the Army schoolhouse, Burress developed a deep understanding of infantry tactics and the operational art. Throughout the 1930s he especially studied and reflected upon alternatives to the frontal attack. Fort Leavenworth was the center for the development of the Army's operational doctrine and Burress was taken by these ideas of operations of maneuver and movement. Having first-hand observed the carnage and losses of WWI, he was committed to avoiding such wasteful attacks.

Burress also concluded at Leavenworth that the infantry-tank-artillery team would win the mobile battles that lay ahead. Burress especially favored the role of the King of Battle—artillery—in his operational concept. All of his future operations with the Century Division would be known for its lavish employment.

Indeed, throughout his time with the 100th Division, Burress ensured that his officers were schooled in the tactics of maneuver well supported by artillery and air support. Entrusted with the blood and treasure of America, he accepted responsibility for the prudent use of those human resources. That responsibility weighed heavily on him. His Headquarters Company Commander, Alden Small, remembers observing General Burress staring pensively out to sea during the division's deployment to France. When he asked the general about his thoughts, Burress responded: "You know, Small, I get awfully concerned about these fine men I am bringing over, for I know I am not going to bring them all back."

This is a stark reminder of the loneliness and responsibilities of command.

One way to bring back the greatest number of Centurymen was to ensure that they received the best training possible. His soldiers would be well-schooled in field craft, physically hard and tough, masters of their individual weapons. His small unit training would ensure that crews, squads and platoons would train to standard, each focusing on its combat specialty. Infiltration courses and live fire exercises would offer a taste of real combat. He would sharpen the division's competitive edge by encouraging unit competition, team sports—baseball was a favorite—and rewarding success.

(I understand some one even came up with a battle of the bands—with unit bands playing their best in fierce competition while the men cheered them on).

Recognizing the exhausting nature of sustained combat, physical training Burress believed that physical training must get progressively tougher—25 miles in full field packs in 8 hours—with constant physical fitness testing.

And, finally, Burress emphasized constant command presence—inspecting training, talking to the troops, developing and stretching commanders, making adjustments, demanding excellence, replacing poor performers. One of his staff officers recalled, "During the division's pre-deployment training, the general was constantly inspecting the troops, talking to them, and through his commanders encouraging them to take pride in their units, and most importantly, to learn as much as possible very quickly so as to be prepared to survive in combat."

A unit does those things best the boss checks.

Two other interwar schoolhouse assignments—both at his alma mater—also added important facets to the development of this great captain of the 100th Division.

Burress did two stints at VMI. In 1922-1924 he was detailed as an assistant professor of military science, where he taught tactics. Later, when VMI's Superintendent, legendary Marine Major General John A. Lejeune, was considering candidates to serve as the Institute's Commandant of Cadets, then-Lieutenant Colonel George C. Marshall, who had taken measure of Burress during their time together at

the Infantry School and had included him in his famous “little black book” identifying officers of potential, nominated Burress for the position, sending the following endorsement to Lejeune:

Burress, I regard as one of the finest men in the army.
Splendid head, energetic, vision, student, ambitious,
exceptional rider, shot, athlete. Stood splendidly at
the Infantry School...Among the young men in the
army you cannot do better than Burress.

Consider carefully the elements of Marshall’s endorsement: Intellect, energy, vision, physical prowess, and a hunger for excellence---all the elements of the consummate professional soldier—a thinking, adaptive soldier, tactically and technically proficient, moving easily in the world of ideas.

Burress assumed duties as VMI’s Commandant, the officer principally charged with the military training, discipline, and leader development in the Corps of Cadets, in 1935, a time of overcrowding in the VMI’s barracks and growing indiscipline in the Corps.

Burress tackled the problem head on and quickly became known as a strict disciplinarian who possessed high standards. It seems clear that many of the elements of his philosophy of leader development came to maturity during his five years as VMI’s Commandant. Firm and strict, he always treated cadet offenders as men, not boys.

The Burress leadership trademark as a leader and commander sharpened: he would enforce discipline, but not at the expense of an individual’s dignity as a man. This appreciation of the human dimension of leadership was a distinctive attribute that would shape his success as a division commander.

On the occasion of Burress’s reassignment in 1940, General Lejeune and the Board of Visitors were effusive in their praise. Lejeune wrote Marshall that Burress had been “very successful as a leader of young men” and had unlimited potential.

Marshall clearly recognized his talents as well, pulling the newly-minted lieutenant colonel into his Operations Division on the Army Staff, a collecting point for the best and the brightest officers in the Army. The Operations Division was the Army Chief of Staff’s “Washington Command Post” and had the mission to develop strategy and staff the inter-service war planning committees. To head this new division Marshall chose the brigadier general he had only recently promoted and recalled to Washington, Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Known for his skillful development of officers and inclination to place them in the field at points best suited to exploit their talents, after only fifteen months Marshall paid Burress the ultimate professional compliment by assigning him in October 1941 as the Assistant Commandant of the Infantry School, a position that Marshall had himself used to so strongly influence and develop a large cohort of interwar officers in as tacticians and leaders.

Burress would be so good at this key position in the Army’s school house that he would be returned after the war to Fort Benning following his great successes as your commanding general to be the Commandant of the Infantry School.

At the Infantry School, Burress was responsible for the preparation of infantry officers for leadership in combat. Leaders instill discipline in their soldiers. He recognized that leadership was a trait that was difficult to discover and one that needed to be nurtured and developed by reaching deep into a soldier's psyche. To him, leaders were made, not born—and their greatest task was to gain an understanding of human nature and how to influence men to overcome their fear of battle and to accomplish what must be done in order to be victorious.

I'm going to let General Burress's own words tell the story of his deeply held beliefs about leadership. Let's listen to five key insights he regularly shared with young lieutenants, the accumulated wisdom of a soldier's experience. These are all direct quotations from his papers.

(1) "New infantry officers must emphasize the human element. It is extremely difficult to find men who can handle men. Soldiers do not respond to push button gadgets as machines do. Treat men the way you want them to be treated. Treat them as persons. They will respect you and go all out for you. By able handling of your men you will be able to accomplish your missions—to make them real soldiers. One highly trained man is worth eight half trained men."

(2) "Leadership and discipline comprise seventy-five percent of the military virtues. If you are to handle your men successfully, you must understand the meaning of these two words—they are almost inseparable. They interlock and overlap, and it almost impossible to speak of one without the other. Good leadership produces good discipline and one is never found without the other. Discipline is an unpleasant word to the average civilian because it suggests punishment, the iron hand of regimentation. Such an idea is wrong, of course. Discipline means obedience to lawful authority. Try to teach discipline without the evils connoted by the word regimentation. You can produce well trained and well disciplined soldiers without suppressing their individuality, diminishing their self respect, or hindering their personal development."

(3) The Infantry is peculiarly and especially the army of human beings and the final success of our infantry is primarily due to the state of mind and hearts of the men who do the fighting. The battlefield is the loneliest and emptiest place that men share together. When an advancing infantry line suddenly encounters enemy fire, men take cover and lose sight of each other. When that happens, the moral disintegration of the unit is for the moment complete. What has been a force becomes a scattering of individuals—it needs reintegration. This may be affected by a single leader, who shows himself and calls out, "Follow me!" If a few rise and follow, the entire unit is apt to get in motion. If the man gets up and says nothing, he will most likely have no followers. The act of moving is initiative; the act of moving and telling others to move is thinking initiative."

(4) "Remember that loyalty waxes strong in the degree that you recognize your soldiers' importance as human beings and their ability to plan and accomplish important tasks. The wisdom that weighs most on the scales of war is that which a leader gains from the study of his men—the ability to see them as they are, both in their strength and in their weakness and to cultivate the one, while safeguarding the other.

(5) "Leadership is based on an understanding of human nature of the ability to see and to appreciate the other fellow's point of view. Only so can we inspire in subordinates the desire to carry out commands.

The most important and effective weapon you will ever have under your control in battle is the minds of the men you will command.”

It’s clear from even this small investigation that there’s something very remarkable about this soldier and his leadership philosophy. He loves and respects his soldiers and understands human nature, and he believes that good leaders can produce well trained soldiers for combat in ways that multiply their value by encouraging initiative and creativity and without diminishing their self-respect. He understands that leadership in combat is a highly emulative activity and requires leaders at all levels to set the example—as he put it, to demonstrate “thinking initiative.” And he thoroughly embraces the idea that to control the most important and effective weapon at the disposal of combat leaders—the minds of the soldiers he commands—means that at its center, leadership is principally an intellectual endeavor. Good leaders recognize leadership is a thinking man’s activity.

It is apparent to me that this leadership philosophy was the guiding intelligence that permeated the division to its lowest level and contributed in large measure to the Century Division’s remarkable record of success in the European Theater of Operations. From your first battle in the breaking of the Winter Line in the Vosges; your approach to Bitche on the French-German border; the Division’s response to Nordwind; the capture of Bitche in January and the subsequent advance into Germany; and battle for Heilbronn—all five of these phases of your combat record are testimony to a division brought up right by a remarkable commanding general.

If General Burress were here tonight, he would not like to be the focal point of any discussion of the division. “There are 14,000 members of the Century Division,” he told his staff. “The real story was theirs.”

Let me end these remarks with two final perspectives—one from one of your own ranks, and one from the other side of the hill:

Lieutenant Lewis Bloom wrote: “I perceived him as an infantry commander in the best traditions of a democratic army. He seemed most sensitive to the lives and welfare of his men. Though he was courtly, his demeanor was calm, without airs, yet astutely professional.”

And the German Army Group G chief of staff, Generalmajor Friedrich Wilhelm von Mellinthin, simply put it this way: “The US 100th Infantry Division is a crack assault division with daring and flexible leadership.”

High praise and well deserved. Well done, Centurymen.

Thank you for honoring me with this invitation.

