

Before the Colors Fade: Recollections of General Burress by Soldiers of Two Generations

by Keith J. M. Bonn and Keith E. Bonn

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“When I enlisted at the Recruiting Station at Grand Central Palace in Manhattan in June, 1943 (with a sloppily altered birth certificate that the recruiter didn’t seem to notice), I never could have guessed that my Army life would finally come full circle right there in New York eleven years later.

I served with the Division from Fort Jackson through the end of the war and into the Occupation, but left Robinson Barracks near Stuttgart in the autumn of 1945 to serve in a European Command outfit in Rheims until my discharge at Camp Kilmer in March 1946. Although I made NCO after leaving the Division, my highest attained rank in combat was PFC . . . and that only after we’d been overseas for two months or so. Not only did I not often associate with generals, but my association with nearly all officers was, clearly, remote at the closest, although I was pretty sure I knew a good one when I saw one, like Captain John Hine, commander of Company B, 397th, or Captain Walter Kimball, CO of Company D. What the hell, though—I was 18 when the war ended and even if I was pretty sure I would remember some of them for the rest of my life, I had no expectation that any of them would long remember me. Officers, especially general officers, did their duty, fought their war and pursued their post-war careers at echelons different from those inhabited by private soldiers in line battalions. I don’t say this with any bitterness or rancor, by the way—such were the facts of life for a wartime PFC in one of 80 divisions in an eight-million man Army which, in the words of the ‘Story of the Century’ ‘came, saw, overcame . . . and retired from the scene’.

As was the case for so many of us who laughed when the NCO at the transition point at Kilmer asked if we wanted to stay in the Reserves, however, the days spent wearing the Century Division patch gradually grew in significance as the years passed. I went through the same period of adjustment that so many others—of all ranks—went through after the War, in the Army or out. Although the horror of combat and the aching hollowness of endless periods away never disappeared, the growing sense that I had one done something . . . important buoyed me through the drifting and uncertainty of the post-war period. Naturally, friendship with the men with whom I’d spent those days grew in significance as well.

I was fortunate to have been aware of the existence of the Division Association early, so while, after a few years, I regularly saw several of my buddies from I/397th. I saw General Burress at these gatherings at much closer range than at practically any time when I served under him. During the War, he had the reputation of being a caring leader and a first-class gentleman, but I was still more than a little awed when we would come to the reunions in those early days. If several of our officers had, with the necessities of wartime and Army discipline now evaporated, turned out to be pretty decent guys as well as good officers, that was one thing, but the General was still a rather distant deity who defied human form. Personal association from more than the distance from our table in the back to the dais was still not really comprehensible.

By the spring of 1954, I was pretty much out of the post-war doldrums. I was married to a lovely and wonderful woman. I had gone to work for KLM Royal Dutch Airlines (for which I worked for the next 30 years) and I was comfortable with my relationship with my pals from the Division. Perhaps it was part of the sense of completeness that comes when one’s life is finally on track on a balmy spring day that possessed me to take part of an afternoon off to ride the ferry across to Governor’s Island to call on the First Army Commander in his headquarters there. Maybe it was pure curiosity that made me take the short trip across New York Harbor, I’m not sure I knew at the time why I did it, but in retrospect, it was

probably that I finally respected myself enough to go call on a man who had led us all through the War, who had taken us from adolescence to battle-hardened adulthood, that I made the pilgrimage, of sorts, to Governor's Island.

I walked into the Headquarters building and introduced myself to the secretary. I told her that I had served with the General in World War II. No, I did not have an appointment. No, I was no longer in the service, even the Reserves and I was not there to lodge a complaint and did not need to see the Inspector General. Others must have done the same before me, or perhaps the woman just knew her boss, because she did not throw me out, tell me to come back, or make me make an appointment for some other day. She just asked me to sit down and went in to see the General. Moments later Lieutenant General Withers A. Burress, Commanding General, First United States Army, came out smiling, shook my hand firmly, took me by the arm and ushered me into his office. He asked my unit and then asked how I was doing. He evinced an immediate, sincere, absolutely genuine interest in everything about what I had done since the War and how my life was at the moment. He made me feel not only comfortable, but completely welcome. He spoke wistfully of his days with us from Jackson to Tennessee Maneuvers to Bragg, from New York to Marseilles to the Vosges, Heilbronn and Stuttgart. He made me feel not like a PFC talking to a three-star general, but like a comrade-in-arms whose post-war good fortunes truly delighted him. He told me that if ever there was something he could do for me, I had only to ask . . . and I knew he meant it. In closing our impromptu meeting, he gave me an autographed photo that hangs on my wall still, a keepsake for our time together during the War and on the day; a memento of the soldierly and immensely human greatness that he brought to all of us who served with him in the 100th Infantry Division.

I have Alzheimer's Disease now. It's embarrassing as hell and it keeps me from attending Division reunions anymore. Although my memory continues to fade and I sometimes can't tell you what day of the week it is or what I had for dinner, I'll never forget the General—or the man—who made me feel so proud of being a Centuryman that day and every day since . . . Withers A. Burress”.

THE GENERAL AND THE CADET

“I admit it; I'm a son of a Son of Bitche and proud of it. From my earliest memories, I recall my father's immense pride in his service as a Centuryman, his intense love of his buddies, the hilarity of many of his stories and the occasional scream in the night as the *other* stories, the ones he never talked about, visited as the dread specters of a combat veteran's dreams. Dad remembered pretty much everything about his time in the 100th Infantry Division, from Fort Jackson to Stuttgart and everywhere in between and regaled me frequently with tales of the heroes and villains of his personal pantheon from the Great Crusade. In addition to the NCOs and private soldiers who were his peers and daily companions, stories of officers figured prominently as well and I learned—and retain to this day—an understanding through his ex-EM's eyes of what makes an officer effective and respected and what does not. At the apex of his pyramid of respect stood his Commanding General, Withers A. Burress; evidently, General Burress' care for the individual soldier and his gentlemanly demeanor had indelibly imprinted themselves on Dad's psyche and while I would clearly never possess the aristocratic dignity of a Virginia gentleman, nor the experience borne of combat in two World Wars, I would nevertheless adopt what I could of this man's abundantly evident efficacy as an officer and leader of American soldiers. Especially if I could meet him and see it for myself.

In the summer of 1975, a scant three months after the fall of Saigon and our Army's first lost war, I was a brand new yearling, or sophomore, at the United States Military Academy at West Point. During the summer, two companies at a time for a week each, my class was shipped off to Fort Knox, Kentucky, for orientation on the Armor branch through hands-on experience with tanks and other armored vehicles. The evenings were mostly spent drinking (18 year-olds were considered both old enough to die for their country and imbibe alcohol in those just-post-Vietnam days), chasing skirts in the Fort Knox O-Clubs (this was in the days before women were admitted to the Corps of Cadets), drinking, and often, drinking. I've rarely been one for a great deal of alcohol and after a night or two at the Fiddler's Green club, I spent my evenings with various members of the cadre of the 100th Division (Training), then putting Reservists

through basic training at Knox, in an attempt to divine just what Dad's division had done since the Second World War.

I came away from these sessions with a trove of information regarding the 100th's post-war activities, as a reserve airborne division, a reserve infantry division and finally, as one of the Army's eight training divisions entrusted with the creation of combat-ready replacements in the event of a general war and I wanted to share what I had learned with the Men of the Century. Several members of the Association staff recommended that I be prepared to tell what I had learned at the reunion to be held at the Granit Hotel and Resort in upstate New York that September. I was stunned to find out, upon arrival with my Dad at the reunion site on the Saturday after Labor Day, that I was to be seated at the head table with the Association President, Brigadier General and Mrs. Tyachsen (another icon I had been raised to revere and rightly so) and . . . Lieutenant General (USA Retired) Withers A. Burress. I had been prepared to brief my findings to the Association President, or even to informally discuss what I'd learned with the members of the Association at the cocktail hour before the banquet. But speak to the Sons of Bitche, from the dais, seated with the combat generals of the Division? As a not-quite-19 year-old yearling at the Academy, it was heady stuff and my heart was in my throat.

General Burress was then 80 and in somewhat frail condition. None of us knew it, but he was attending his last reunion with his men. If I would ever have a chance to meet this legendary officer, in retrospect, it had to be at the Granit in 1975.

After being graciously introduced by the Association president, I took my notes to the lectern in the middle of the dais and began to share what I'd learned about the organization I knew my audience so loved. The courtesy and interest level evident on the faces in the crowd made speaking to this, the largest group I'd ever addressed, somewhat easier. As I turned to the left to establish eye contact with the members of the head table, I found my eyes locked with those of General Burress. The intensity and dignity of his gaze did not rattle me, as had the scrutiny of so many officers I'd quailed before as a plebe for the past year, but rather spoke mutely to me of his confidence, trust and reassurance. Any vestiges of butterflies, already partially attenuated by the collective attitude of the members of the Association at large in the audience, disappeared altogether in that steady countenance of their commander. That look must have been the same one he gave to his officers and men upon activation at Jackson, before trial by umpire in the Cumberland Mountains of Tennessee, upon commitment to combat along the Meurthe, during trial by fire and ice at Bitche and before the final hell that was Heilbronn. It was a look to be remembered for the ages, from the eyes that had seen so much soldiering, suffering, gallantry, and humanity; it was the look that said, 'Go on; you know what you're doing, mister; Go on'. So I did.

Heartened by that unspoken encouragement, as some of the readers of this may remember, I did more than recount the 100th's post-war accomplishments. I concluded with an insistence that while an understanding of the present was indeed important, the roots of the Division's past were critical as well. My father had long ago memorized a poem by a rifleman of the 397th Infantry, Harry Hillers, entitled *What Has Become of Our Comrades?* and had passed it on to me, verbatim. Even as I stood to the lectern, I had not been at all sure that I would have the self-confidence or courage to share such a moving, emotional piece with a crowd of strangers, but after General Burress' silent exhortation, I had to. The standing reaction of the 100th Infantry Division Association upon completion was all the indication I needed to know that it had been the right thing to do.

Evidently, General Burress was in need of rest shortly after I finished my talk. He appeared pretty bushed as he shuffled past the dais, his men at attention for the last time in his life. As he passed me, he stopped, extended his trembling hand and said, 'I enjoyed your talk.' I clasped his hand and with a lump the size of a hand grenade where my Adam's apple should have been, thanked him for the compliment. If I didn't know the meaning of being a Centuryman under the command of such a giant, I at least knew what it meant to be a son of the Sons of Bitche.

Nearly 19 years have passed since then and the General has been gone from our midst for almost 18. I never saw him again. In the two decades that have passed, I have met many active duty general officers, but have never, ever, been so affected by the wordless presence and charisma of one as I was by General Burress. His breed has all but vanished, if indeed it was ever numerous to begin with. In the four infantry

battalions of the three infantry brigades or regiments with which I have had the privilege to serve since, in the classroom and on the playing fields of USMA where I taught and coached three years as a captain and in the Joint Task Force in which I serve in Honduras, I have humbly tried to pass on to the soldiers of tomorrow something of the greatness of the soldiers of yesterday's 100th Division and their General. Perhaps such immortality is what Hillers hinted at when he concluded his poem to his fallen comrades with this musing on their possible final destiny, "Or perhaps to the Halls of Valhalla, where all good warriors reign/And we fervently pray to Heaven above, that their sacrifice was not in vain". As long as there is one American soldier who knows, not necessarily of the man, but of the dignified manner of imparting instruction and encouragement, of the love for soldiers and of soldiering that was Withers A. Burrell, his life has meaning and he is with us still".