

GENERAL IKE AND HAIR



By Paul A. Porter

I would like to record an episode which to my knowledge has never been fully reported. This relates to General Eisenhower and Hair.

On May 23, 1945, I drove from Paris to Rheims with Captain Harry Butcher, General Ike's Naval Aide and close companion, for a conference. I was there in my capacity as Chairman of the Board of War Communications and Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission. A survey group including the Chief Signal Officer of the Army, General Stonor, the Director of Naval Communications, Admiral Joe Redman, and four ranking members of the Senate Interstate & Foreign Commerce Committee, Senators Wheeler, Hawke, McFarland and Capehart, was embarked on a mission I had structured with the objective of pooling the elaborate communications equipment deployed for military purposes as the basis for a world-wide quasi-governmental international communications system for peaceful uses. However, this is another story and has nothing to do with General Ike and Hair.

We were received graciously by General Eisenhower and I proceeded to outline the purpose of our mission. He seemed relaxed -- this being less than a week after the German surrender. He listened courteously but appeared pre-occupied. When I had

finished, General Ike abruptly changed the subject.

He picked up a teletype from his desk. It was a column by Drew Pearson. He read the entire column with grave concern. There it was reported that conditions at a repatriation camp for American prisoners of war recently released from their German captors were worse than those at the Stalag camps. It reported that food, shelter, sanitation, medical care and other supplies were scandalously inadequate and that the recently liberated G.I.s would have enjoyed a better environment had they remained in the German camps.

General Ike said "I am about to fly down to Lucky Strike and check this out." With a scowl, reflecting his deep concern, he invited the Mission, including the four Senators, to accompany him. Of course we accepted.

General Ike did not alert the Commandant that he was enroute for an inspection until shortly before our C-47 was about to land at the air strip near Le Havre. We taxied up to the apron of a former Nazi administration complex where a limousine and some jeeps were waiting. General Ike and the party deplaned. The General disdained the limousine and immediately headed for the first jeep.

There were some 40,000 liberated American prisoners at Lucky Strike. General Ike directed his driver to tour this

repatriation base under his direction and not according to the preconceived program that had hurriedly been laid on. With a practiced eye, he looked at supply centers which were outfitting the recently liberated G.I.s with fatigue uniforms, shoes, toilet articles and other amenities.

Contrary to the reports reaching the States, Lucky Strike Camp appeared to be in good shape, a tribute to the genius of American organization. There were abundant supplies, ample food, hospital units and even a couple of U. S. O. entertainment troupes. Tents and quonset huts dotted the landscape, athletic activity was underway in hastily improvised recreation areas and General Ike appeared satisfied that his recently liberated soldiers were receiving good treatment.

It came time for lunch. The Commandant requested that we go to the Officers' headquarters for a ceremonial meal. General Ike vetoed this suggestion and instead advised that we would take our chances at a G.I. chow line of his own choice.

General Ike selected one at random where there was a long line of liberated G.I.s -- some of whom had been prisoners for as long as four years -- others for a few months.

The General walked slowly down the line taking the time to converse here and there at random. He greeted one tall



who did not receive inspiration from General Eisenhower's genuine gratification for their survival and release, his warm solicitude for their comfort and well-being and his blunt commitment for an early return to their homes.

General Ike then proceeded to have a private conference with General Egmont Koenig, the Commanding Officer of the Normandy Bay Section. This lasted for perhaps three quarters of an hour. Then we reassembled at the air strip for our flight back to Rheims.

A loud speaker system had been installed. General Ike mounted an improvised platform to speak to the entire contingent of some 40,000 repatriated American prisoners of war. The General quickly got to the point. In simple language, he expressed his affection for his soldiers, and avoiding any maudlin rhetoric, informed them that it was his objective to return them to their homes as soon as possible. He explained that shipping was short as the war in the Pacific was still in progress. He then offered them an option. He stated that it was his purpose to get them all back as soon as possible but this could not immediately be done in comfort. The option was to spend further time at Lucky Strike or to be crowded cheek to jowl in what shipping was available, sleeping on the decks and enduring other discomforts in an over-crowded troop convoy. Then General Ike posed the question "What do you want?" In unison a chorus of some 40,000 voices responded



"We want to go home, Ike!"

General Ike then said "Okay. This is the way it will be. But when you get home, I don't want to hear of any bellyaching to anybody, including these four Senators on this platform, that you suffered any hardship on your return voyage." The chorus then swelled with the chant "Get us back home, Ike." To which he responded "Men I'll do my damndest. So long."

Then with that great smile he saluted and to the applause of these soldiers, we boarded our plane for the return flight to Rheims.

General Ike had invited us to dinner. Over cocktails, he seemed preoccupied as though his mind was still back with the recently liberated soldiers. Abruptly and apropro of nothing that was being discussed, he suddently said to Butcher that there was one important thing that seemed lacking in the set-up at the Lucky Strike encampment. He said in his view these lads would feel better and it would be a great boost to their morale if they had a haircut, observing that some had probably not had a decent haircut in four years. Senator Wheeler wryly observed, gazing at Ike's thinning, balding pate, "What the hell do you know about haircuts, General?"



He instructed Butch to mobilize at least 50 barbers and deploy them at LeHavre before the week was out. Butch told me later that he scrounged around Paris and all over France to comply with these instructions.

I was informed that Operation Haircut was a great success. I do not know whether there is a lesson or any moral derivative to be drawn from this little saga.

I leave that to Joe Namuth.

#####