

★ INTRODUCTION ★

*Gerard M. Devlin*

History has shown us that there are very few men who become a legend in their own time, and even fewer who have come to be known as a Renaissance man. But during his truly extraordinary and productive life, James M. Gavin easily qualified for both of these lofty titles.

I first met him in 1972 upon joining the General Gavin Chapter of the 82nd Airborne Division Association in Lexington, Massachusetts. In those days our chapter was almost entirely comprised of grizzled battle-scarred World War II paratrooper veterans who still were tough as nails and great admirers of their courageous wartime leader. Our monthly meetings were held in a private function room at the U.S. Air Force Noncommissioned Officers Club located at nearby Hanscom Field, and consisted of the usual happy hour which was followed by a formal dinner and short business meeting.

Much to the delight of all chapter members, our greatly revered general would occasionally attend one of those meetings. Prior to his arrival, a lookout would be posted at the large window overlooking the club's parking lot. On sighting his approaching car, the lookout would alert us by saying, "Hey, quiet down. The General is here"—at which point every man in the room (including me) would rush to the window to observe our chapter chairman meet and guide the General into the club. Entering the room one step ahead of the General, the chairman would ever so formally announce, "Gentlemen, our commanding general." As is the military custom, we would snap to attention, facing the door to see the good-natured General briskly entering with a big smile on his Irish face and also to hear him say in a booming voice, "Thank you, gentlemen; please carry on. And most importantly, let's all have a drink!" Glass in hand, he would circulate among us, warmly shaking hands and just being one of the guys.

During the following years, when I began my career as an airborne historian and writer, the General was most helpful and generous with his time, explaining to me in great detail the World War II combat operations

of his 82nd Airborne Division. So I therefore am grateful to have been asked to write the following words concerning this great American patriot.

James Maurice Gavin was born March 22, 1907, in Brooklyn, New York, to a young immigrant woman newly arrived from Ireland. Only a few months after his birth, dire personal circumstances forced his mother to place him in the Angel Guard Home, an orphanage administered by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn. There he remained until shortly after his second birthday, when he was adopted by the Gavin family of Mount Carmel in Pennsylvania's anthracite coal-mining region.

Though he consistently achieved extremely high marks in school and demonstrated a great thirst for knowledge, his adoptive parents abruptly terminated his education when he completed the eighth grade. The only reason he was given for this discouraging turn of events was that the time had come for him to start helping support the family, which had fallen on hard times because of recent work stoppages in the coal mines. For the next few years he held several low-paying jobs and dutifully contributed all that he earned to the family. Throughout this long and stressful period, he spent most evenings at the town library studying the same subjects his former classmates were being taught in school and also pursuing his newfound interest in American military history.

On his seventeenth birthday, still facing a bleak outlook for any opportunities to achieve some measure of success in life and with tension mounting within the family, he ran away from home and joined the army. His first duty assignment was in Panama, where, even though his pay as a new enlistee was only twenty-one dollars per month, he faithfully sent half of it home each payday. Because of his earlier success in self-education, plus his natural good soldierly qualities, he quickly mastered all basic military skills and rose to the rank of corporal before reaching the midpoint of his three-year enlistment. Shortly thereafter, he achieved even greater success by winning an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, through competitive examination.

Upon graduating in June 1929, he placed in the top third of his class and was commissioned a second lieutenant. Three months later he married Irma M. Baulsir of Washington, D.C., to whom he had become engaged during his senior year at the academy. There then followed a series of routine infantry assignments in the United States during which he was promoted to first lieutenant in 1934. It was while the Gavins were stationed at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, in November 1933 that they announced the

birth of their daughter Barbara, who would prove to be the only child of their marriage.

Several months prior to Barbara's birth, Irma had briefly returned to her parents' home in Washington so that the blessed event would occur in the thoroughly modern Walter Reed Army Hospital located there. Accompanied by his wife and young daughter, Gavin left Fort Sill in July 1936 for an overseas tour of duty with the 57th Infantry Philippine Scouts based a few miles east of downtown Manila at Fort McKinley. His Philippine Islands assignment ended in November 1938, at which time he was transferred to the 7th Infantry Regiment at Vancouver Barracks in the state of Washington.

Though Gavin was still only a lieutenant after graduating from West Point ten years earlier, his star was finally beginning to rise. Recently, he had come to the attention of the army's top brass for quite successfully serving in what officially was a captain's capacity as a company commander in both the Philippines and at Vancouver Barracks. And so it was that, even though all officer promotions were excruciatingly slow in the peacetime Depression-era army, he was promoted to captain on June 1, 1939. Exactly one year later he was ordered to West Point for duty as an instructor in the tactics department.

Gavin and his small family remained at West Point until August 1941, when he requested and received a transfer into the army's paratrooper program, which was then just beginning to take shape at Fort Benning, Georgia. At the time he submitted his request for that hazardous duty assignment, America was not yet at war. (Japan's devastating attack at Pearl Harbor was still four months away.) The army's entire airborne force at Benning consisted only of an understaffed Provisional Parachute Group Headquarters, the Parachute School, and three parachute infantry battalions, two of which existed in skeletal form. Though he had no way of knowing it at the time, by war's end there would be five airborne divisions plus several separate regiments and battalions, bringing the airborne force strength to more than 100,000 men.

On their arrival at Benning, Gavin and his family were billeted on the second floor of a recently refurbished World War I barracks known as Officers Quarters 23. The following day he reported to the Parachute School to begin the arduous four-week course that ended with him being awarded the coveted silver wings of a paratrooper. In recognition of his demonstrated aggressive brand of leadership both on and off Benning's

jumping fields, Gavin's superiors placed him in a number of challenging command and staff assignments. As all of his bosses and contemporaries expected, he performed each of them with remarkable ease and efficiency, which resulted in his being catapulted up through the senior officer ranks at dizzying speeds.

Gavin was promoted to major on October 10, 1941; to lieutenant colonel only four months later, on February 1, 1942; and to colonel seven months later, on September 25, 1942, by which time he had been appointed commanding officer of the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment. One of his more outstanding contributions to the success of all rapidly expanding airborne forces at Benning occurred while he was the S-3 (plans and training) staff officer at the Provisional Parachute Group's Headquarters. There, in record time, he wrote Field Manual 31-30, a prodigious U.S. Army training guide titled *Tactics and Techniques of Air-borne Troops*, which detailed everything an airborne unit commander would need to know and do to achieve success on the battlefield.

During total darkness on the night of July 9, 1943, Gavin's 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, then an integral part of Major General Matthew B. Ridgway's 82nd Airborne Division, jumped onto high ground behind the beaches to protect dawn landings of American amphibious troops at Gela, Sicily. In September he and his regiment made another successful night jump to reinforce the Allied beachhead at Salerno on the Italian mainland. Promoted to brigadier general (one-star rank) the following month, Gavin was appointed deputy to Ridgway.

On D-Day, June 6, 1944, the 82nd made massive predawn parachute and glider landings six miles behind German lines in Normandy, fighting for thirty-three days without relief or replacements while stopping all enemy attempts to reinforce their shattered coastline defense units. Gavin succeeded Ridgway in August, becoming, at age 37, the youngest airborne division commander in the war. On September 17, he led the 82nd in another huge airborne assault, this time in broad daylight and fifty miles behind German lines in Holland. His division was still fighting in Holland the following month when he was promoted to major general (two-star rank). In December the 82nd played a decisive role in halting the German tank thrusts during the epic Battle of the Bulge. Early in February 1945 the division pierced the Siegfried Line, marching deep into Germany. Three months later his airborne troopers linked up with Russian tank units advancing from the east. Gavin and his 82nd were on occupation duty in

Berlin until January 1946, at which time the entire division was returned to Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

Though just back from Berlin, Gavin now had to come to grips with an extremely serious matter. Ever since well before the war had even begun, he and his wife Irma knew their marriage was fatally flawed and they had been discussing divorce. They agreed to remain married for the duration of the war because a divorce would have resulted in great hardship both for Irma and their daughter Barbara. Still unable to resolve their longstanding differences now that they had been reunited at Bragg, the couple first separated and finally divorced in 1947. The following year Gavin married Jeanne Emert Duncan of Knoxville, Tennessee.

Between the emotional turmoil of his separation and divorce from Irma and then the pressures of commanding his division at Bragg, Gavin managed to write his first book, *Airborne Warfare*. In it he reviewed successes and failures of American airborne missions during the recent war and also expressed incisive views concerning how to manage large-scale parachute and helicopter airborne missions deep into the future. Published in 1947, it met with considerable success, instantly establishing him as the most forward-thinking tactician within the burgeoning worldwide airborne community.

On completing six years of distinguished service with the 82nd Airborne Division in 1948, Gavin became chief of staff at Fifth Army Headquarters in Chicago. In June 1950 he received an overseas assignment to Naples, Italy, as chief of staff at Headquarters Allied Forces Southern Europe. Two years later he received a prestigious field assignment to Stuttgart, Germany, as commanding general of VII Corps. In February 1954 he returned stateside to take up new duties on the Army General Staff at the Pentagon. Following his promotion to lieutenant general (three-star rank) in March 1955, he was appointed chief of the army's vast Research and Development program, remaining there until his retirement in January 1958 at age fifty.

Gavin wisely used his spare time as an unemployed civilian by putting finishing touches on his second book, *War and Peace in the Space Age*, a scathing appraisal of the American military's strategic planning and its recent downgrading of conventional weapons systems. His book had been on the market only a few months when he accepted a lucrative job offer as vice president at Arthur D. Little, Inc., an international consulting firm in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He was promoted to president of the firm in

1960 and to chairman of the board in 1961. In February of that same year, President John F. Kennedy appointed him ambassador to France, a post he held until resigning in October 1962 and returning to his previous position at Arthur D. Little. Gavin retired from Little in 1977 after twenty years with the firm.

For the next several years, full-time retired life greatly agreed with Gavin. There were long walks with his wife Jeanne along the beach at their seaside home on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, plus a return to his two favorite hobbies, golf and painting. Also during these happy times he wrote his wartime memoirs, *On to Berlin*, published in 1978. But shortly after celebrating his eightieth birthday in 1987, he began suffering from a combination of old and new ailments, which included the effects of too many bone-jarring parachute landings during his eight years on jump status (including his roughest landing, during the 82nd's combat assault into Holland, where he fractured his spinal column yet remained in command of his division); the wound he sustained during close combat with German tanks on Sicily; the gout; a weakening heart; and increasing problems with Parkinson's disease, which had been diagnosed when he was in his mid-seventies.

James Maurice Gavin, soldier, businessman, diplomat, and author, died February 23, 1990, at the age of 82. His mortal remains lie buried beside the Old Cadet Chapel at West Point. On the day of his funeral he was sent off to the other side in grand style by an honor guard and large contingent of paratroopers, all flown in from the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg.

In this fascinating book, Barbara Gavin shares with us more than three years' worth of letters she received from her famous father during World War II, while she and her mother Irma were residing in Washington, D.C. This large collection of heartwarming and morale-building letters from a fighting paratrooper general to his daughter back on the home front is truly unique in American World War II history. Each letter provides us with a privileged public look into the thoughts and emotions of someone who was a very private man. Surely, they will become a valuable source of previously unknown wartime information to present and future generations of historians. But most of all, they will provide many hours of enjoyment to everyone fortunate enough to read them.



*The General and His Daughter*

