



No. 5
CONVERSATIONS WITH GENERAL J.
LAWTON COLLINS
Transcribed
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INTRODUCTION

Former Army Chief of Staff J. Lawton Collins was inducted into the Fort Leavenworth Memorial Hall of Fame on 17 May 1983. The Hall of Fame was established to honor American soldiers who have contributed significantly to the defense of the United States. General Collins, recognized as the "best" corps commander during World War II, was elected by a panel of distinguished historians.

It is customary for the Memorial Hall Association, together with the Henry Leavenworth Chapter of the Association of the United States Army, to invite to the ceremony relatives of those inducted. As General Collins was the senior living soldier to be inducted, the Fort Leavenworth Commander agreed to invite him to attend the induction. General Collins became the first soldier to be present for his induction ceremony. During the coordination for his visit General Collins made it clear that he did not want to travel to Fort Leavenworth just for a ceremony, but that he wanted to talk to students and faculty. We at the Command and General Staff College took advantage of the chance to talk with this illustrious wartime leader and to learn from his experience. The paper that follows is a summation of the discussions conducted with General Collins in the spring of 1983.

CONVERSATIONS WITH GENERAL J. LAWTON COLLINS

On 17 May 1983, student and faculty seminars were held with General J. Lawton Collins at the Command and General Staff College (CGSC), Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas. For the students and faculty of CGSC, this visit presented a unique opportunity to discuss issues with a wartime corps commander. General Omar Bradley once termed Collins the ablest of all American corps commanders during World War II. This paper begins with a short biography of General Collins and then proceeds with the seminar. This is not a verbatim transcription of the proceedings, but a synthesis of the questions and answers from three seminars, arranged and loosely grouped under subject headings.

Biography

J. Lawton Collins graduated from the US Military Academy as a second lieutenant of infantry on 20 April 1917. After basic branch training he served briefly at Fort Jay, New York, until assignment to Germany in 1919. He returned to the United States in 1921 and spent the next several years in school at Forts Benning and Sill and at the US Military Academy.

He graduated from the Command and General Staff College in 1933, the Army Industrial College in 1937, and the Army War College in 1938. Between these school assignments, he served with troops in the Philippines. In January, 1941, he was assigned as chief of staff of the VII Army Corps and gained valuable experiences in larger unit' operations.

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, General Collins was designated chief of staff to General Delos C. Emmons and traveled with him to Hawaii. He assisted in the reorganization of the Hawaiian Islands' defense until he became Commanding General of the 25th Infantry Division in May, 1942. The following December he led the 25th Division into Guadalcanal. After clearing the island of Japan, the 25th moved on to New Georgia and another successful campaign. General Collins' style of leadership in the Pacific earned him the name "Lightning Joe." In December, 1943, he was transferred to Europe and took command of VII Corps before the invasion of France.

VII Corps landed on Utah Beach on D-Day, the 6th of June, 1944. General Collins' corps then spearheaded the breakthrough east of St. Lo, participated in closing the Falaise gap, drove north into Belgium, broke through the Siegfried line defenses, and captured Aachen. VII Corps stopped the German northern drive in the Battle of the Bulge, drove on to the Rhine, captured Cologne, and, finally, linked up with the Russians at the Elbe River. The 12th Army Group commander, Omar Bradley, wrote, "Had we created another ETO Army, despite his youth and lack of seniority, Collins certainly would have been named the commander."

Following the war, General Collins was named Vice Chief of Staff, United States Army, and then served as Chief of Staff from 1949 to 1953. He represented the United States on the NATO Military Committee and Standing Group until 1956. During this assignment, he was also appointed special representative to South Vietnam, with the rank of ambassador. General Collins retired from active duty in 1956.

In May, 1983, General Collins was inducted into the Fort Leavenworth Hall of Fame, an occasion which presented an opportunity to conduct the seminar that follows.

Professional Development

Question: In addition to the Army's education system, how did you prepare yourself for war?

Collins: To some considerable extent, by reading military history. I told my own son (he was a young officer at the time), "If you really want to learn your trade, you couldn't do any better than studying Freeman's book on Robert E. Lee (Douglas Southall Freeman, R.E. Lee, A Biography). Just follow the campaign from Vera Cruz to Mexico City, and you can get all the tactics you will ever need." I think people that didn't read that book never realized that the Mexican War was Lee's training ground. He was Scott's reconnaissance officer. That's when he learned his trade, and if you've never read that

volume of Freeman's, you would find going back and reading it now worthwhile. I read military history, and I got a good deal out of the good ones.

I am a great believer in the Army school system. The thing that saved the American Army--no question about it in my judgment--was this school system, the entire school system: branch schools, the Command and General Staff College, the War College and the Army Industrial College. If it weren't for the Army school system I don't know what in the world we would have done.

There can be an excess of it. As a matter of fact, I thought I had an excess of it at one time. General Stuart Heintzleman was the Commandant here when I took the course, which incidentally was a two-year course, the second year being devoted to corps and army units and to the logistical problem, of which I knew very little prior to that time. Heintzleman called me in at the beginning of the second year and said that he'd been observing my work and that I was doing very well. He had a letter in his hand, and he said, "I'm going to put in for you as an instructor." He must have seen my face fall. He stopped, and I said, "General, do you mind if I make a statement?" He nodded approval, so I said, "I've been teaching or being taught now for fifteen or sixteen consecutive years, and if I were to be stationed here at Leavenworth for another year I think I'd lose all practical ability, if I ever had any." He said, "By God, Collins, you're right," and threw the letter in the wastebasket. So, he let me go to troops. Nevertheless, the school system made an army for us. I've said I'd give up a division before I'd give up one of our schools.

Question: Was combined arms training in your time focused at the Command and General Staff College or did it begin in the branch schools?

Collins: Well, of course, the basic schools, infantry, armor, artillery, concentrated on the techniques and tactics of their particular arms. Each of them was a fine technical school. Benning, I think, took the lead, because it had General George Marshall as the Assistant Commandant. These branch schools did include some amount of supporting weapons instruction, but not as much as perhaps they should have. Time didn't permit it, and the facilities didn't permit it. I was lucky. I asked to be sent to the field artillery school at the end of my time as a student at Benning. An extremely valuable year. I always felt, if possible, you ought to be entitled to serve in more than one branch. I was fortunate in going to the field artillery school before becoming an instructor at Benning. I'm sure that I was a better instructor having gone to field artillery school. Ft. Sill was a good school, though there were some things wrong about it. It didn't believe in moving the observers up into the front line; it had them stuck on hilltops. That was due to the type of country at Sill. You could sit on a hilltop and see for miles. I did have a problem with that as a corps commander. The first corps artilleryman I had was a good technician. But at the first maneuvers I discovered that he had his observers way back behind the front line on some hill back there. That doesn't work. You've got to be right up with the infantry. As infantrymen, we wanted the best artillerymen, irrespective of what their other job was, to be right up there with the front line of the infantry to know what was going on and to adjust fire there. That became the system. I wasn't responsible for it. It was something developed out of logic, and I was simply one of many people that contributed.

The other thing about our artillery when we really got started, and Sill deserves the credit for this, was the development of the system to mass fires. The Germans had a great gun, an 88-mm gun, but they never did really learn how to handle artillery. This may be shocking if there are any German officers here. But it's a fact. We knew so much more about artillery than the Germans did, it was a tremendous advantage. At one time, I massed twenty-two battalions on one target. Of course you couldn't afford that unless the target was of tremendous importance. So you had to make an analysis of where the critical fight was going to be, then mass your artillery to help.

So, I'm a great believer in having officers learn not only their own branch of the service but at least one other, and preferably two. If an officer's an infantryman he ought to know something firsthand about artillery and air support--those two things. The infantry is no good without good artillery and without good air. Just can't get anywhere.

Question: Some of our younger officers do not appear enthusiastic about logistics. We tell them that great commanders were also good logisticians. Would you comment on that, please?

Collins: Yes, I agree with you 100 percent. As I've said, I went to different branch schools, and I also went to the Industrial College. But that's not the same thing as the logistical support of a unit. The Industrial College is at a different, higher level, covering the organization of the nation for war. Extremely valuable and utterly important from a broad standpoint. But I think the officer assigned to a large troop unit with a good logistical support system has a chance to learn something. If he's lucky he goes to one of the colleges; if not, he better learn something about logistics on the job, because you can't move without a good logistic system. Unless you know how to handle logistics, you're going to be sunk.

Doctrine

Question: How did we capture the lessons learned of World War II in the early postwar years?

Collins: Initially, at any rate, we let the commanders write the doctrine--the men who fought it. We paid attention to what they thought, not to what some staff officer thought. That's the crux of it. You can always use a General MacArthur or General Marshall, if you have any spare General Marshalls around.

Question: Some of the officers feel they are a new breed, what with new equipment and tactics coming on line. Did you feel that way in the 1930s?

Collins: No, I don't think we did. You have to understand the basic task that you have to do. You have to understand the enemy and his capacity, and that comes from a good estimate of the situation. Because the enemy has something to say about what's going to happen on a battlefield. You can make all the plans in the world, but, unfortunately, the enemy steps in sometimes. Therefore, you have to be flexible in your planning. You've got to make an estimate of the situation. You've got to weigh what you would like to do against what the enemy might do to counter that. You've got to discuss the situation with your commanders, your subordinate commanders, to be sure that they understand what you are doing. Then you follow your plan as far as you can. But, you've got to always be ready to shift if it doesn't work out

quite the way you would like it to work out. It never does, exactly. You've got to be flexible in your judgment to decide. After you know more about what the enemy is likely to do, what his reactions so far have been, you may have to modify your initial plan.

That's the way I fought the VII Corps. I put out a field order, a limited number of field orders, one for each new major campaign, one that was worked up by careful analysis and careful discussion with the division commanders. When everybody had pretty well agreed on what we were driving at, I would make a final decision. A commander is the only one who can make a decision. We might start in with a plan, but right off the bat the enemy would step in and do something that we didn't quite anticipate and force a change. You've got to be ready to shift accordingly.

Every day I was out in the field visiting as far as I could the critical point of action. Where the crux of the fighting was likely to be was the place I headed for. I tried, and most of the time was able, to visit practically every division during each day.

Because I was out in the field constantly, I had to have a good man back at the command post to act in my stead. I used the artillery commander, General Williston B. Palmer. He was a crusty guy if there ever was one, but a damn good artilleryman, fully competent to command the corps. When I was away he had authority to act, if necessary. My aide always kept in contact with the headquarters by telephone. We'd plug a phone into the lines leading up to the front. If a division commander wanted to get me he could immediately get me through the line that came from his Command Post. We would then discuss whatever the problem was, and again I would have to make a decision. But I'd also want to know what the division commander said about it. What was he going to recommend? I constantly tried to get the judgment of my subordinate commanders. So I kept them fully informed when the time came for a decision. Only one man can make the decision and that's the commanding general or commanding officer. And that holds irrespective of the size of the unit.

Question: The corps commander is normally considered the highest level combat command, and looking at what you did in Normandy, I think that certainly was true of your actions. It appears that the role has been eroded over a number of years, by the limited war period and by the evolution of the contingency corps concept. It appears the corps commander is now filling many of the roles of the theater commander or the army commander, and thereby he has become a manager rather than a combat leader.

Collins: I would thoroughly disagree. The corps is a combat unit. The division and the corps are primary, and the battalion is the key unit. You've got to have good battalion commanders if you want to have a good fighting army. General James Van Fleet, who became one of our top-flight combat commanders, was my idea of what a combat commander ought to be: he was a front-line soldier and a great fighter. But he also knew the arms. You've got to know the capacity of your riflemen, machine gunners, supporting artillery, and supporting air. Those are vitally important.

Question: Do you think the corps, the role of the corps, has changed with the new weapons systems and the communications? Has the corps become too large and complex to command as you commanded VII Corps?

Collins: I don't believe so, but I don't know. It's been a long time since I had close contact with the Army. When I left a job as chief of staff I always called on the new chief. But I said, "I'm not going to be looking over your shoulder. If there is anything that I can do, if any there's advice I can give or any help, fine, just yell. But I'm not going to be looking over your shoulder to tell you how to run your job as chief of staff of a different army under different conditions." But I think it works out well, the present system does, if the commanders recognize that they've got subordinates that can do an awful lot of the job if taken into their confidence in the planning phase. Then you make a judgment and a decision. That is decisive, the decision has to be made by one man. But a commander is making a mistake if he tries to do it all by himself in the preliminary stages. At least that's the way I fought it.

Staff

Question: Could you tell us what you looked for when you selected your staff at the corps? What did you look for when you went after your logistician--your G4? What kind of a man did you want as your G3? G2? G1?

Collins: As a matter of fact, I had to weigh those things because I became the Chief of Staff of the VII Corps when it was first organized in the south. I had to select the people that I wanted for staff. The commander was a much older man, General Frederick Smith. Very fine man and a very good soldier. And one of the best things about him was that he knew his limitations. He knew he was too old. I think General Marshall felt that he had to give these older men, all of whom were older than he, an opportunity to command instead of paying no attention to them. But General Smith was too old. Now, General Smith recognized his inability. He was a coast artillery gentleman to start with and had never served with any mobile troops, and we used to say that the coast artillery gentlemen all had minds that were fixed in concrete. They never had an opportunity, really. So, General Smith said, "Collins, I don't know any of these young men. You go ahead and select the staff."

Well, I had run across General John Hodge while he was in Benning as a student along with me. He was a tough little guy that did well in the course. He had all the markings of a good soldier. I marked him down as a man who someday I might want to have as an assistant. On the supply side we had a man equally competent, although he had not been a logistician. That was Ed Hall. Wonderful chap, who ended up as one of my deputies when I was Chief of Staff. I picked him as the G4. He didn't like it a bit--he thought he ought to be G3. I'd already decided I wanted John Hodge for G3. Ed Hall, John Hodge, and I had taken the Benning course together. So I knew both of these men pretty well. The artillerymen had already been chosen by the War Department, I guess. They didn't make a very good choice to start with; in fact, the first one just ran away. I knew him from Sill. He was a competent man but one of the laziest guys you ever heard of. He knew he wasn't going to get along well with me, so he just got himself assigned somewhere else. The next field artilleryman assigned to us was a man of the old school. His Observation Posts were placed up on a hill behind the front line. I had learned in the jungles in the South Pacific that the only place for observers was right in the front line.

Prior to the Second World War, artillery tables of organization provided for one officer who was the liaison officer, usually about the lowest second lieutenant. And nobody paid very much attention to him, which was an utter mistake. When it came to fighting we put the best artillerymen up as the forward observers. Battery commanders. People really expert in their job. Not some poor second lieutenant wetting his feet for the first time.

This artilleryman did not work so well. I had to ask General Bradley finally to give us an artilleryman more familiar with modern techniques.

G1 and G2 had been assigned by the War Department. I didn't have anything to do with their selection. They were pretty good men, but they weren't quite up to the caliber of Ed Hall and John Hodge. We had the first corps headquarters that functioned as a staff, and we followed the principles taught right here at Leavenworth on how to handle a staff. Without Leavenworth we would have been in a bad way.

Question: How did your staff learn to fight better? How did you keep them from making mistakes?

Collins: By functioning as a staff. Experience makes a good staff.

World War II (German/Japanese Soldiers)

Question: Could you compare the fighting qualities of the German and Japanese soldiers? You were one of three who fought in both the ETO and the Pacific. How would you rate those two enemies as you found them?

Collins: Well, they were radically different. The German was far more skilled than the Japanese. Most of the Japanese that we fought were not skilled men. Not skilled leaders. The German had a professional army. So, we had totally different conditions in the Pacific from what we had later in Europe. I was fortunate in serving in both theaters, so that I had some experience fighting in the jungle as well as fighting in open country and in industrialized areas. On the one hand I had sufficient experience in Hawaii to know how to handle conditions in the tropics. And yet, at the same time, when I switched over to European theater I had had practice in something along that line at Benning and at the combined arms schools. So it fit in very readily and very easily. But I was lucky in having those assignments.

Regardless of the theater, you were still handling men, that's basic. If you know your business handling men, you can go anywhere. That to me has always been the great appeal of the Army. That's the real thing.

Question: How did you find the Japanese soldiers? You said, "unskilled." But I think you also said in your book, "courageous, and never gave up." Is that a fair translation?

Collins: That's right, yes. The Japanese Army was very much like ours in a sense. They had a small corps of officers who were professionals. But the bulk of their people were not professionals in the sense of knowing the business and so on. They didn't have the equipment that we had. They didn't know how to handle combined arms--the artillery and the support of the infantry--to the same extent we did. They were gallant soldiers, though. They fought to the end and you had to knock them off--that was all there

was to it. And we had to do that right on Guadalcanal. They had a Japanese strongpoint up on Mount Austin, completely isolated, but they wouldn't give up. They withdrew whatever they could withdraw before we settled on them. And thereafter, they just fought until we annihilated them. That's what it came down to.

The Japanese were very gallant men. They fought very, very hard, but they were not nearly as skillful as the Germans. But the German didn't have the tenacity of the Japanese.

ETO

Question: Why did we keep pushing divisions into the Huertgen Forest in what seemed to be a stalemate in 1944?

Collins: Well, I complied with the orders of the First Army. It was an area that had to be covered by somebody, and we happened to draw the area: Aachen, and then Malmédy, and then a goodly portion of the Huertgen Forest. I didn't have any choice in it. I would never pick it as the place to be. It was assigned as part of my corps sector, and reluctantly we had to fight in it. At the time when we took over that area, the corps was on a front of thirty-five miles. That's much too big a front for a corps, so what we did was narrow down the active front. We put 3d Armored and the First Regiment of the 9th Infantry Division on a fifteen-mile front and then covered the rest of the corps front with a reinforced cavalry group under a great cavalryman and fine fighter, Joe Tully, West Point, 1916. I gave Joe a little additional artillery, an additional battalion of tanks, and a battalion of infantry. Joe really had a small corps of his own. He did a wonderful job with it.

Somebody had to cover the Huertgen Forest. I happened to be the unlucky one this time. But not all of it, because later on, the area was turned over to a different corps, and it did the real fighting in the forest. We fought on the fringe of the forest, most of it. We did finally clear the top end of Huertgen, but it was tough going. Anybody who had to fight there would have had the same problem. Nobody was enthusiastic about fighting there, but what was the alternative? The Germans didn't counterattack against my flank, because we had some troops there that would have prevented them from doing so, but if we would have turned loose of the Huertgen and let the Germans roam there, they could have hit my flank. It's easy to go back to second-guess and say, "Well, you shouldn't have done that." Then what would you have done? Who would have cleared it? How much time would it have taken? Nobody was enthusiastic about it, least of all the 704th, but we had to do it. That was part of our job, but we didn't fight it all. The V Corps later took over. The forest covered a series of dams that our intelligence people had alerted us about.

Question: I was going to ask you that, too, sir--Why weren't the Ruhr River dams selected as an objective?-but you just answered it. The intelligence people didn't see them as an important objective.

Collins: They didn't, and they didn't recognize the threat they posed. We all knew there were some dams. We had not studied that particular part of the zone. They came as a surprise to most of the intelligence people in the army. There were two or three of them. It was sometime before First Army

realized their capacity to flood the southern part of the army zone of action. That was an intelligence failure, a real combat intelligence failure, on the part of the top intelligence people.

Question: Would you please discuss the Remagen breakout? Why was the 12th Army Group held back, or was it held back from the 7th of March when we got the bridge and began to establish a bridgehead? It didn't really break out until after the 24th. Why did we wait so long to go deep?

Collins: Well, first of all, we had a big obstacle ahead of us. The Rhine River was a real river. That was a tremendous obstacle. It took special equipment, special training for formal amphibious warfare. We were short on rafts and the other landing craft right up till the end. They never could keep up. They are very vulnerable to enemy fire and a lot of them were lost in the other actions prior to that time. It took very competent leaders to handle an amphibious crossing over a river as big and as swift and as dangerous as the Rhine. We were lucky in having seized a bridge, which was done by the III Corps on our right. Bradley immediately recognized the value of it and said, "Pour it in!" So we moved as many troops in there as we could possibly get over one rickety bridge, so rickety toward the end it finally collapsed. It had been shelled and had a number of individual hits. The sheer vibration over a period of time undoubtedly weakened it.

Everybody knew we wanted a bridge if we could get it. The Germans missed the boat on that one, yeah, they did. They tried to destroy it. They only damaged it.

Personalities

Question: Why, looking at it from Eisenhower's level, did he want on Montgomery to go forward first?

Collins: Monty had a great deal of influence and the British had a great deal of influence on Eisenhower, no question about it. Remember that the British Army had fought in WW II for, what was it, two years before we even fired a hostile shot. They had taken a tremendous number of casualties among the ablest young men in the empire. So it's natural that they were more conservative than we could be. We were a bunch of youngsters who didn't know any better. We hadn't had the casualties the British Army had had. Monty was a fine defensive fighter up to a certain point. But Monty's basic trouble was that he was a set-piece fighter, in contrast to George S. Patton. This was epitomized in the crossing of the Rhine. Monty was always waiting, waiting until he got everything in line. He wanted a great deal of artillery, American artillery mostly--American tanks, also. Then, when he got everything all set, he would pounce. But he always waited until he had "tidied up the battlefield"--his expression--which was his excuse for not doing anything. Monty was a good general, I've always said, but never a great one. Too cautious, entirely. But, maybe if we had had the same experience in casualties as the British had had, maybe we would have been more cautious, too.

Question: Can you comment on the leadership style and the ability as field commanders, and using the Korean War as a focal point, of General MacArthur and General Ridgway, to include their relative leadership styles and ability to take command?

Collins: Well, in the first place Matt Ridgway was a front-line commander, and he actually visited the front. MacArthur rarely visited the front. His forte was the strategic field. He never really got into combat that I knew of in modern times. He'd done a good job in World War I as a brigade commander in the Rainbow Division. I understood he did a good job. He was competent at that stage of the game, but he never did pay too much attention to the troops the fighting men up front. Rarely got out in the field. He was a lofty, theoretical commander, far removed from the dirt and the dust. and mud and whatnot of a commander of front-line troops. I would say that he was a fine strategist up to a certain point, but one that lacked the knowledge of the fighting side of the Army; tried to do it from far distances. He tried to coordinate the fighting in Korea between Edward Almond on one side of the mountain range and Johnny Walker on the other side, with a practically impassable mountain chain in between. At the end, when things were going badly, all he did was issue an order. I could never believe that he really thought that the two forces could fight their way across those ranges. They couldn't with what they had available--too formidable an obstacle.

Question: Sir, could you assess for us General Walton Walker, as a general, as a commander, as a field man?

Collins: He was a fine commander in the field. He irritated a lot of people. He was not the type of man that you would mix with. He had an abrasive sort of a temperament. So he irritated people, unlike suave, polished MacArthur. But so far as his command responsibilities went, he did a fine job in Korea. And, in my book on Korea, I hope I gave him the credit he deserves. He had three groups of possible counterattacking units. He had John Throckmorton's 5th Regimental Combat Team in the Army, and he had the other great commander--later a three or four star general--Mike Michaelles. Those two Army commanders and Oliver Smith, who commanded the Marine outfit; it was a good Marine outfit, and a good commander. Johnny Walker used to plug the gaps in the front. He did it with great skill, in my judgment. He was never given credit for it by MacArthur, who really didn't follow the fighting closely. Walker should have been given full command of the Eighth Army instead of MacArthur trying to coordinate two forces--Walker's and Almond's--with an almost impassable mountain range in between them. MacArthur tried to coordinate them, from how far was it? Eight-hundred miles or something or other. Couldn't be done.

Reserve Components

Question: We have a much larger Regular Army today than you had between the wars, but we are also realizing that our reserves and National Guard units must be prepared to fight and fight well. Can you give us some special hints from your experience on what we, as Regular officers, can do to build these qualities in reserve and National Guard units?

Collins: I'd start with the Army school system. I'd send as many reserve officers and National Guard officers through our school system as the school system could afford, with adequate travel money for the students. In other words, we might substitute schools for experience with troops in the field. The Guard has had a great disadvantage in comparison to the regular service. We did our best to correct that by sending as many of the officers from the Guard and reserve to our schools. Put them through

schools. Treat them just like Regular officers. And many of them will become fine division leaders. Ray McLain, for example: there wasn't a better commander than Ray McLain . . . but Ray had had a lot of service on active duty in regular training. He was with the Oklahoma National Guard. And he turned out almost every year and took his active duty training. So, Ray was not your ordinary reserve officer by a long shot. He stepped right in and took command of the XIX Corps, with which we were having trouble, and fought it as a good commander. He and I became very close personal friends, we worked together, and towards the end of the war, up until the end we worked right along side of each other, all the way from France to Germany, without a hitch. If Ray wanted a boundary changed or needed a little more artillery than I had given him, he'd ask for it. If it was possible I'd give him what he wanted. The same thing went with boundaries. We talked them over and if there was a chief piece of terrain that would be better if it were in my corps I would ask for that, and if it was better for Ray we'd make an agreement and adjustment. So that between us we'd try our best to coordinate the operations of two corps and it worked. He was a fine corps commander; fine man personally, too.

Question: Could you give us some of your reflections on the efficiency of the mobilized National Guard divisions when you were Chief of Staff?

Collins: Of the Guard divisions--and I assume you include the reserve divisions in the same category with the Guard--well, the Guard that fought in World War II was a totally different National Guard from that of the past. Frankly, many of the original Guard were politically dominated. In other words, the men elected their own officers. The man that was going to be a battalion commander would get most of his staff from his personal friends in the hometown or neighboring town. It was inevitable that the Guard was dominated largely by politics. These men didn't have too much opportunity to go to summer camp, pay was not much originally in those days, and it was the people who were genuinely interested in the military service, like Ray McLain, that went not just two weeks to a camp where it was sort of a social affair. McLain really got down to business. He was the exceptional man.

It was a radically different Guard that came out after the Second World War. The earlier Guard was often politically dominated. The man that was head of the National Guard Bureau right after WW I was a first class politician. He held his job down there for years on end and never really had any combat experience.

During and following the Second World War, we had a good many men then in the National Guard that had real combat experience, or logistical experience, and were ready then to act with ability and experience. The Guard then was recognized, given more responsibility, and there's nothing like responsibility to develop ability. If you've got something challenging your soldiers, then they get down to business, and that's what happened to the Guard and reserves. The Guard today is infinitely better than any Guard we ever had prior to the war. General Marshall himself had a lot to do with that. After he left the 1st Division, it may have been shortly after the First War, he was stuck with a National Guard unit. Pretty much put up on a shelf by the people that were then running the army, but being George Marshall, he didn't just sit on the shelf. While he was there, he did something--learning what the Guard's problems were and then later, when he had authority, doing something about it. Vastly different story later, on.

Vietnam

Question: Sir, it has been reported that around 1961 General MacArthur recommended to President Kennedy that we not get involved in a large-scale land war on the Asian continent. Based upon your ambassadorship to Vietnam, can you tell us what President Eisenhower's feelings were about that same issue, around 1953-54.

Collins: Well, I don't know, and I don't know about any recommendation that was made by General MacArthur. I sound as if I am an anti-MacArthur man. If I have created that impression, it's a wrong impression. I was "anti" when he didn't know what he was doing, but he did know what he was doing during most of his- career. But when he tried to command two armies separated by a jungle and an almost impassable mountain range and do that from 800 miles away I lost confidence in him. Neither MacArthur nor any man can do that. In other words, things passed MacArthur by. He should have been relieved earlier. The Joint Chiefs unanimously supported the President in his relief, no matter what you may have heard to the contrary that it was politics that did MacArthur in. What was the other part of your question?

Question: What was the view of General Eisenhower, then President, in regard to our long term involvement in Vietnam? Whether we should or should not get involved in any kind of large-scale land war in...

Collins: I agreed with the bulk of the officers of the Army. I don't know of a single senior commander that was in favor of fighting on the land mass of Asia. I don't know of a single man who would have been for that.

Army Organization

Question: Are you pleased with how the Army has evolved today?

Collins: I think we made a great mistake when we did away with the triangular system. General Marshall was the person who had the greatest influence on the postwar Army. He recognized the American Army was going to be based largely on citizen soldiers. They were not going to be as professional as the German officers, so he felt that we ought to organize our troops in such a way that if a man started in as a lieutenant, the tools that he was going to use would be essentially the same as the tools that he would use as a company commander, or as a battalion commander. The triangular system of organization suited that very well. The company was organized with three rifle platoons and a supporting light automatic rifle platoon; the battalion with three rifle companies and a supporting machine gun company; the regiment with three battalions and artillery or air as the supporting element. His theory was that if you could command a platoon you could command an army. The tools were basically the same. The theory that was back of each successive echelon was the same. That was very sound, in my judgment, and I think that when we got away from this system we took a step backwards.

This business of commanding five battalions or eight battalions or some other number of battalions presents a tough problem to the young officer. It is a lot more difficult. General Marshall saw it: we were never going to be a fully trained civilian Army, and we'd better make its organization as simple as possible, and that's what the triangular system offered. Still makes a lot of sense to me.

Question: There's a lot of talk going on now about possibly reorganizing or reforming the organization of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Based on your experience as the Army Chief of Staff, do you have any ideas on this ongoing issue?

Collins: Well, this is one of the things on which I'm going to qualify my answer. I've said after I retired I was not going to look over my shoulder and second-guess the man that followed me, so I deliberately didn't try to get involved in the later organization. There's always going to be some dissatisfied political leaders. There are always going to be some dissatisfied officers in the Army, whatever structure you have at the top. I still think the present system is pretty good: it has its weaknesses, but all can be corrected by having the right men in the right spots--able men. These various schemes all have their good points, but they also have their drawbacks. For example, some say it would be better to appoint men who are no longer associated with their own service. There is some merit in this, but it all depends upon whether the chairman is broad enough to appreciate the responsibilities of the other services. We had to have a chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the lack of which was a fundamental weakness. The Navy fought the idea of unification tooth and nail. Why? Because they didn't want to have anybody telling the Navy what the Navy ought to be doing. Real unification began to be effective when the appropriation and management committees in the Congress were unified; when they did away with the Naval Affairs Committee and the Army Military Affairs Committee, and then unified these committees.

This was an eye opener for all concerned, including Mr. James Forrestal himself. He had been Secretary of the Navy and followed the Navy line and apparently believed in what the Navy wanted, which was no interference from Army, Air, or anybody else. When he became the Secretary of Defense, he realized for the first time that he had great responsibility, but no authority to do what, from a unifying standpoint, he needed to do. He then said, according to Eisenhower, "There are four or five people in the Army that I can fully trust." He named them: "Bradley, Collins, Wedemeyer, etc." "In the Navy," he said, "there are only one or two that I can really trust."

On that note the seminars ended. The faculty and students at the Command and General Staff College thoroughly enjoyed reliving history with one of the Army's most distinguished officers.