

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

Tribute given by Lieutenant General John K. Cannon at Appreciation Dinner for Lieutenant General Ira C. Eaker, which was held in the Silver Glade Room, Skirvin Hotel, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, January 24, 1947, at 7:30 p.m.*

It is always a great pleasure for any airman to visit Oklahoma. A pleasure because the people of this great State have demonstrated, throughout the years of air history, a deep-rooted interest in aviation. That interest has been strong and unflinching, providing a pillar of strength for airmen throughout the long years when air power was permitted to languish through national neglect. And that strength, in turn, has been a vital factor in promoting the growth of air power through thick and thin, enabling the wings of the nation to grow proud and capable once again. I assure you all airmen are grateful for these things.

We have gathered here tonight to pay homage to and honor one of the World's great airmen, Lieutenant General Ira C. Eaker. Everybody wants him. Oklahoma claims him. Texas claims him. Oregon is trying to entice him to the far West. He was born in Texas, educated in Oklahoma, and has been at large ever since.

He joined the Infantry as a 2nd Lieutenant in 1917. He was drilling with his battalion at El Paso when fate took a hand. An Army airplane, unable to climb over the mountains, landed on the parade grounds. Eaker walked over, chatted with the pilot, and examined the machine. He noticed a loose spark plug wire, fixed it, and helped the pilot to start the engine.

"You seem to know more than I do about this," said the pilot. "Why don't you get into flying?"

"How?" asked Eaker.

"Fill out this blank," said the pilot.

Eaker was soon on his way to flying school at Austin, and has been flying ever since. Pure chance gave him the first shove. He took over from there. He knew what he wanted to do and had a plan from there on out.

After serving short periods at Kelly and Rockwell Fields, he was assigned to duty in the Philippines. Instead of absorbing beer in the Officers' Club, he absorbed law at the University. While on duty at Mitchell Field in 1924, he attended night classes in business law at Columbia University. 1933 found him at the University of Southern California taking a course in Journalism. Since then, three successful books and numerous published articles have come from his typewriter.

During this time, he was not neglecting his administrative or flying duties. Distinguished Flying Crosses in peacetime were doled out like Hope Diamonds, but he won the decoration twice—on the Good Will flight around South America in 1927, which was done under rather primitive conditions, and in 1929 as chief pilot of the "Question Mark", under the command of General Spaatz, which set an endurance record of 151 hours.

On the morning of February 20, 1942, two taxis, containing seven American officers in civilian clothes, because of Portugal's neutrality, halted at the barred gates of the Cintro Airport outside of Lisbon, honked their horns, but to no avail. The gate remained barred. A stocky figure left one of the cars, strode to the gate, unfastened the cross bar, swung it up with a hard shove, and marched back to the car.

"Go ahead," he told the driver, "we have to catch a plane."

Not many hours later, a Dutch KIM DC-3 arrived in England with Ira Eaker and his six companions—the seed of the mighty Eighth Air Force which was to crash down on Hitler from the air. The incident of Eaker at the gate in Lisbon was not only prophetic, but typical of the man who all his life opened gates while others sat and waited for something to happen. And always, as the future was so dramatically to portray, before opening the gate, he had a plan.

But at this time, Ira had nothing—no flying fields, no airplanes, no organization. In his pocket was a secret paper, and in his head a firm conviction of three Air Force principles: (1) That there is no real defense against a superior Air Force; (2) that it alone is not sufficient to control the air or, for that matter, to destroy an Air Force in being. It is also necessary to destroy the ground installations from whose operations the enemy builds, maintains, and supplies an Air Force; (3) that if the air battle is lost, it is inevitable that the battle on the ground will also be lost.

During the next year, the tremendous intellectual and moral courage of the man was to be proved. The British wanted to integrate American crews into British units and have the whole participate in night saturation-bombing under British control. Eaker was adamant in his insistence for a completely autonomous American Air Force.

Next, the British insisted that the Americans equip and train their own units for night saturation-bombing, claiming that daylight bombing was prohibitively costly against German defenses. Again, Eaker was adamant and held out for daylight precision bombing.

A Board of twenty-one experts, American and British, met in Liverpool to appraise the B-17. Their report damned the B-17 as being unsuitable for operations over Western Europe. Eaker merely stuck out that chin and said, "They are wrong."

In January, 1943, Eaker was called to the Casa Blanca Conference to defend his plan for daylight precision bombing against the oratory and influence of the still unconvinced British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. German leaders, who later described Eaker's daylight precision bombing as the decisive factor in their defeat, must now regret that the gates of the Cinto Airport, outside of Lisbon, were not permanently blocked on that historic morning of February 20, 1942. Thereby the entire course of the war might well have been changed.

In January, 1944, his work completed in England, he was ordered to the Mediterranean as Air Commander-in-Chief, being the first American airman to command all allied Air Forces in any theater. Here his Strategic Air Forces followed the pattern he had so successfully set in England, and his Tactical Air Forces set the doctrine, procedures and standards for this type of aerial warfare for all theaters.

His physical courage is the equal of his moral and intellectual courage. He led the first daylight precision bombing raid over Europe on August 17, 1942. Not a plane was lost.

During the invasion of Southern France in August, 1944, General Devers, Sixth Army Group Commander, was particularly anxious to observe from a good vantage point the initial assault. He asked General Eaker for help. General Devers was put in a piggy-back P-38 and spent two and one-half hours observing from this particularly fine vantage point the action on all beaches. Eaker, in a single-seater P-51 Mustang, personally led the fighter escort for this mission.

A few days later, in company with General Devers and Admiral Hewitt, an inspection was made of the progress of the front line troops in the beach head. That night they were to spend on Admiral Hewitt's flag ship,

which was lying off the beach head. Just at dark, as Admiral Hewitt and his guests were going up the gang plank, a German air raid struck. A stick of bombs was dragged right across the flag ship. It would have done your heart good to see those so-called old "fuddy-duddies" hit the deck and take cover. Several men were killed and many wounded.

In the early fall of 1944, General Eaker was required to visit Moscow. Instead of taking a circuitous route through Tripoli, Cairo, Teheran, over the Caspian Sea, and up the Volga to Moscow, he elected to save time by going on a shuttle-bombing raid, hitting the Germans enroute, and landing upon completion of the combat mission in Russia. After completing his business in Moscow, he again took a crack at the Germans on his return trip.

In March of 1945, as the war was drawing to a close, and with General Arnold a sick man, General Eaker was called back to Washington to carry on the administrative burden of closing out the war and ushering in the peace.

General Eaker is one of the great inspirational combat leaders of the war. He is one of the world's outstanding airmen. He is a distinguished and honored citizen of the State of Oklahoma and of our country.

General Eaker leaves the service next month and returns to civil life. We shall miss him. All we in the Air Force can say to you, Ira, and to your lovely wife, Ruth, is that wherever you go, or whatever you do, God speed you and God bless you.

*General Key, acting as Toastmaster, introduced a large number of celebrities of the Army, Navy and Air Force of the United States, and also called upon Judge Robert L. Williams of Durant, Oklahoma, President of the Oklahoma Historical Society, who emphasized the pride of the State of Oklahoma in General Eaker. President Adolph Linscheid, East Central College, Ada, Okla., spoke of the school life of General Eaker while attending and graduating from Southeastern State College at Durant, Oklahoma and paid tribute to his character.

Tribute by Major General William S. Key* to Lieutenant General Ira C. Eaker, on the presentation of General Eaker's portrait to the Historical Society of Oklahoma. The presentation was made July 24, 1947 at 2 p.m. in the Auditorium of the Historical Building before a large group of distinguished guests.

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen, Distinguished Guests:

It is my desire to make it plain that while I appreciate the honor paid me by the president of the Historical Society of Oklahoma in being requested to present to the Society the portrait of this distinguished American, at the same time, I shall express my deep conviction that the task could be better performed by one more able in thought and in words than I.

This occasion brings face to face the great, and perhaps the most remarkable epoch in the history of man and the stern, confusing hour of present American history.

Just a brief time ago, we who sit here were surrounded by all of the danger, the distress, and the chaos of the greatest struggle America has ever known. This nation, whose history proves that it is devoted to peace, had been dragged into a world conflict. Once again we believed that our liberties were at stake; our way of living, bequeathed us by our first fathers and defended at Lexington and New Orleans, at Monterey, Gettysburg and along the Rhine, were challenged, and we went forth to meet

that challenge with our army upon the land, our ships upon the sea, and our flotillas in the air.

Germany under Hitler was a crafty, a trained, and a mighty foe. The history of World War II will reveal that at certain hours it was not clear who would be the victor in that awful struggle. There is a time in every contest where the choice of the hour for combat, the arrangement of a battalion or a regiment upon the field, the choice of a man to lead and direct, must decide for victory or defeat. Who can tell what would have been the story had another than General Eisenhower or Admiral King, or General Spaatz been chosen to lead the charge either on land, sea or air.

So, as I see it at certain times, when the land forces of our country were interlocked with that of the enemy, and the question arose as to how we could blast the strength of central Germany from its deeply entrenched positions, destiny was with us. When General Spaatz called upon the man from Oklahoma, this man whose portrait today we shall place in the halls of this building, to honor it and keep sacred our devotions to liberty through the years to come, this man—Lieutenant General Ira C. Eaker, was called and sent his air forces into and throughout the fields of the enemy to blast them into defeat. He went with a courage and skill that won him the recognition of the world and the devotion not only of his commanding and associate generals, but tributes from all liberty loving people of the world.

Oklahoma, who nourished this man in his earliest years, whose homes have been those of his neighbors, whose schools and churches have been his friends, salutes him with pride beyond any measure of words this day as he comes to receive the best honor we can give him.

Thank God, he has made it so that when history tells of its distinguished men and women, it must also mention Oklahoma.

We, the citizens of this young state, are proud of its distinguished men and women. We believe that liberty is not sustained and preserved by cold and static governments. What constitutes a state? Men-strong-minded men, who know their rights and dare maintain them—these constitute a state.

Judge Williams, to you as president of the Historical Society of Oklahoma, it is my greatest happiness to present you in behalf of all the friends of Lieutenant General Eaker, who, filled with admiration for his achievements and fidelity to his citizenship in and love for Oklahoma, have made this portrait by a great artist, Boris Gordon, possible.

This picture will hang in the Hall of Honor in this building through all the years, as long as the granite, the marble, and the steel shall give this building the power and privilege to protect it. Here our children and our children's children shall come and look upon this portrait and shall gather lessons of honor and valour, and as America's children have done through all its proud years, they shall go away and meet every trial and duty that may call them to defend their rights and their liberties.

*After the Presentation Address by General Key, Mrs. J. Garfield Buell, Tulsa, introduced General Eaker. General Eaker spoke impromptu, and no record of his address was made, but a summary of his remarks is contained in the Minutes of the Meeting of the Board of Directors of the Oklahoma Historical Society, printed in the Autumn Issue of the *Chronicles of Oklahoma*.