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The Army Versus the Army's Newspaper.

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AUTHORS' REPRESENTATIVE

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BY KLAUS MANN

ROME, APRIL

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The main issue of the peculiar feud is one of the paper's departments, "Mail Call" -- an open forum where American military personnel (occasionally joined by local civilians and members of allied armies) were welcome to express freely their ideas about all kinds of subjects, from such basic questions as Army chow up to such complex problems as U.S. foreign policy. "Mail Call" -- remarkably popular with all the enlisted men and even with some of the more broad-minded officers -- ~~was~~ got on the nerves of certain brass-hats in Caserta (MTOUSA headquarters in Italy). Some of the GI letter-writers did not mince ~~my~~ matters but stated their criticism of Army institutions in unequivocal terms -- at times quite irreverently and aggressively. Repeated attempts

were made on the part of high-ranking officers to muzzle these ~~straightforward~~ straightforward voices. Last summer, a minor crisis developed when Caserta threatened to impose its censorship on the "Mail Call" column. At that time Lt.Col. Robert Neville still was publications officer. With his approval, the members of the editorial staff (to which I then belonged) and many of the technicians addressed an appeal to the commanding general. Our protest was successful: an uncensored "Mail Call" continued to be one of the main attractions and most characteristic features of the Army's newspaper.

A few months later, on 1st November, Neville -- then redeployed to the States -- was replaced by Maj. Hal C. Kestler. Formerly the editor of a provincial American paper (Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin), Kestler -- a quiet, competent man -- did an excellent job in keeping up the high journalistic standards maintained by the Mediterranean Stars and Stripes in the past. The task he had to meet became increasingly difficult -- not only because of a disturbing shortage of qualified personnel, but also, and above all, because of continued and intensified interference from Caserta authorities.

On 19 February, Lt.Gen. John C. H. Lee, commanding American forces in Italy, honored the editorial staff (consisting of enlisted men exclusively!) with his personal visit; a dinner was given for the general in the modest dining room of the Albergo Capitale, billet of the Stars and Stripes in Rome. On that occasion, Lee -- apparently in high spirits -- made a speech full of fine patriotic phrases, culminating in the announcement that he, the supreme theater commander, had decided to take a more active interest[?] in the GI journal and, more especially, in the paper's much-discussed letter column. In other words, the censorship which our protest had prevented several months before, was now to be imposed, after all.

But Major Kestler turned out to be a tough customer -- not inclined at all to renounce silently one of the basic freedoms guaranteed by the American Constitution^d and reaffirmed by the Atlantic Charter. For several weeks, the courageous publications officer managed to oppose successfully the general's attempted interference. On March 17, however, the paper appeared with a sensational front page announcement under the heading, MEDITERRANEAN STARS AND STRIPES AT CROSSROADS. This was the gist of the statement: "Effective today, Mail Call, for more than three years a channel for soldier opinion, disappears from the pages of this newspaper." In explaining this step, the editors referred to a "three-year struggle to maintain the editorial independence of The Stars and Stripes, Mediterranean -- a fight which on many occasions was given warm support by the highest of Allied combat leaders." But at this juncture -- the announcement continued -- the paper's cause was apparently near defeat "with the imposition of measures by the Commanding General, MTOUSA, designed to end free expression of opinion in our columns by U.S. military personnelⁿ on duty in this theater." These measures "have been imposed over the strongest protests of the present editorial staff of this Army newspaper."

The statement was both remarkably frank and remarkably intelligent. It dwelled on the moral dilemma confronting ~~staff members~~ ^{journalists} who are "first of all soldiers, aware of their responsibility toward their appointed leaders," but who also remain "professional newspapermen, proud of their profession." "For more than three years it has been possible for this staff to combine both professions in the service of the country they love." Under present conditions, however, "these soldiers, as newspapermen, find the further performance of certain of their duties intolerable."

The duty in question was undoubtedly the editing of a censored letter department. And in fact, "Mail Call" did not appear in the issue of March 17.

In the next issue -- surprise! -- the letter column reappeared, without any editorial comment. Orders from Caserta! Lee insisted on his censorship -- and on the continuation of "Mail Call." Moreover, the general instructed all staff members to keep complete silence about the whole controversy. From now on, the matter was taboo!

But Major Kestler went on struggling and resisting. On March 25, he called on the general, accompanied by three members of the editorial staff, "in an effort to restore his confidence." The next day, Lee relieved the major from duty as publications officer and replaced him with his own public relations officer, Lt.Col. A. Delbert Clark.

American soldiers stationed in Italy would have remained unaware of these developments, if it had not been for the reports of a civilian publication, The Rome Daily American -- recently founded by three former Stars-and-Stripes men: Jack L. Begon, William B. de Meza, and Louis M. Cortese. While the Army newspaper was under strict orders not to mention the explosive affair, The Daily American, under the date of March 28, came out with the fat headline: STARS AND STRIPES HEAD DISMISSED BY GENERAL LEE; GI STAFF PROTESTS. The same issue carried the text of Kestler's letter to the Commanding General -- another unusually bold and poignant document. The ~~Commanding~~ major stated bluntly that he welcomed "this relief from a duty which, because of repeated affronts to my ability, character and intelligence, has now become intolerable." Also, he asked his chief to "appoint a court of inquiry to examine into the facts of my administration of this U.S. Army newspaper, my loyalty and integrity as an officer, and as a private citizen."

At the same time, the paper's entire staff of three officers and 51 enlisted personnel addressed the following letter to Brig. Gen. Charles L. Dasher, Rome Area commander:

We feel that Maj. Hal C. Kestler, the publications officer of The Stars and Stripes, Mediterranean, has been dismissed as the direct result of the stout defense he has made of his journalistic beliefs.

Since we share those beliefs, we feel that we should not be asked, in fairness to the major, or to the newspaper which we have published as a team, to remain on our jobs.

Signed: 51 Enlisted Men, 3 Officers

Obviously, both the major and his staff wanted a showdown. Kestler received a group of newspapermen -- declaring that his dismissal left him "no longer bound" by Lee's order not to discuss the tense Stars-and-Stripes situation. Now he revealed that, in conformity with the general's censorship directive, all letters received from U.S. troops in the theater had to be submitted to a higher echelon for official approval. Some letters, he said, were rejected and others changed by this ~~new~~ censorship. He added that, upon receipt of Lee's directive, he had requested permission to print it in The Stars and Stripes, so that the paper's soldier readers would know that their letters were being submitted to higher authority for censorship. His request was refused. "By classifying his directive, General Lee denied us that right, thereby making Stars and Stripes a party to subterfuge."

Quite an astounding accusation, this -- made by a major against his commanding general! What was to happen next? Was Kestler in for a court-martial? Would the paper be suspended? Would the enlisted editors be busted to privates and given company punishment?

Nothing of the kind! The Daily American -- having announced on March 29 that "Lt.Col. A. Delbert Clark, newly-assigned publications officer of The Stars and Stripes, has arrived to assume his duties" -- surprised the next day its readers with this disclosure: LEE LIFES CENSORSHIP OF STARS AND STRIPES.

It looked like a complete about-face on the part of the general. The U.S. commander in Italy seemed to revoke formally his censorship directive of two weeks ago. Kestler was to continue, "for the time being," as publications officer -- withdrawing his request that an Army Court of Inquiry examine his "loyalty and integrity." At the

same time, however, Lt.Col. Clark was placed in command of Major Kestler's unit. At a press conference on March 29, Clark declared: "As of yesterday morning, I was informed that I was not replacing Kestler, but being added to the staff. My job will be officer in charge."

He disclosed, furthermore, that staff members who had protested against General Lee's original censorship directive and later against the supposed order relieving Maj. Kestler by unanimously requesting assignment elsewhere, had decided to hold their request in abeyance. The colonel denied that General Lee contemplated an early suspension of The Stars and Stripes. "It is General Lee's firm desire to keep The Stars and Stripes going as long as it is physically possible."

As for the "Mail Call" situation, Clark had prepared a statement for distribution to the press. "Effective immediately," it read, "final decision on letters to be published in Mail Call of Stars and Stripes will rest with the senior officer of The Stars and Stripes staff." The same day, a slightly different version of the same announcement appeared at the head of the readers' letters feature in the paper itself. According to this text couched for GI consumption, "final authority on the contents of Mail Call rests with the staff of The Stars and Stripes." No word about the senior officer! No allusion to the fact that this senior officer in charge of Mail Call happens to be Lt.Col. A. Delbert Clark -- the very man whom General Lee appointed for that particular purpose to that particular job.

Another subterfuge? Perhaps. But even presuming that Lee actually changed his mind at the very last minute, in face of a surprisingly brave the independence of The Stars and Stripes has been seriously threatened, opposition on the part of Kestler and his crew -- the fact remains that and also that a ~~significant~~ dramatic conflict between the Army and its official newspaper has been consistently hushed up in the columns of the very organ concerned. Besides, one cannot help wondering whether it was really the "Mail Call" issue alone what irritated and antagonized the general.

It is true, Kestler emphasized in his statement of March 17 that "no criticism of the conduct of this newspaper has accompanied the newly-applied restraints. The professional and personal integrity of the staff members has been upheld and confirmed by those who now find it necessary to muzzle us." But if there has been no official criticism, there was -- or still is -- a kind of whisper campaign against the paper's editorial staff and policy, both past and present.

Not that anyone questioned the high journalistic quality of The Stars and Stripes, "Mediterranean! On the contrary, it was generally agreed that that particular paper had about the finest record of all service publications. But wasn't it a little too independent and liberal in its views? Didn't it print too many cracks against officers and the Army's ascribed caste system? (Think of Bill Mauldin's cartoons! Weren't they at times rather on the shocking side?) Moreover, some people felt that there wasn't quite enough anti-Russian propaganda. Could it be that certain staff members had radical leanings?

Rumors and accusations of this kind could be frequently heard, at Caserta and elsewhere. But nobody quite dared to come out openly against The Stars and Stripes, as long as the war was on. Undeniably, the paper was popular with the combat soldiers; it helped in building and keeping up the morale of the fighting men. Conscious of this fact, brass-hats chose to leave the GI journal alone -- if somewhat grudgingly, at times. But now, with the war being over and the combat soldiers mostly redeployed, the feelings of a commanding general are suddenly hurt by the paper's straightforward language.

Is General Lee's present action against The Stars and Stripes in the interest of American prestige and American Army morale? Our military newspaper enjoys considerable popularity with Italian civilians. What may be their reaction when they hear about MTOUSA's censoring and humiliating its own official organ? And what about those many allied soldiers who have been for the past three years faithful readers of the GI daily?

A letter from "A Disgusted British Soldier" recently published in The Rome Daily American gives us an idea how some of them are feeling about the general's attitude:

After six years of fighting to attain the four Freedoms pledged by Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston S. Churchill, we now see those same pledges turned into a mockery massacred at the altar of military discipline, by high-ranking, misguided officers, who see fit to impose their authority in the wrong places.

General Lee has seen fit to use his authority in a wild endeavour to close down on the freedom of The Stars and Stripes, and as a result Major Kestler, its publications officer has been relieved.

He stood firm when the General's misguided sense of duty imposed a military censorship on the paper. The staff of The Stars and Stripes has acted with commendable courage in supporting their chief in this action.

As a British soldier, I have always imagined that our own Service newspaper, Union Jack, was a free paper which interpreted the facts without fear or favour. That opinion has changed. Union Jack has been scrupulously careful to avoid any mention whatsoever of the action taken against its companion paper.

Where is the freedom of the press? How can we tell the people of Italy that they are entitled to Freedom of Speech and Religion, and Freedom from Want and Fear, when the very papers that we rely upon are muzzled?

Speaking as a member of the British 8th Army who has served overseas for four years, I am sure that I am voicing the opinion of many thousands of others, when I say that not only are we indignant at the possible loss of a grand newspaper like The Stars and Stripes that has been with us in every action since the days of North Africa, but that also we feel our confidence in the integrity of Union Jack has been misplaced.

All newspapermen resent the censorship order by General Lee including those men serving on British Army newspapers, but apparently they can no more express a free opinion. What price Victory?

If a British soldier reacts so sharply and bitterly -- how is the General's blunder to impress our own men, in Italy and back home? They may get the impression that Lee's authoritarian tactics have the backing and blessing of the War Department; that they foreshadow a new line to be soon adopted, or already sanctioned, by Washington. Americans, both in mufti and in uniform, might suspect this news policy to be opposed to free thinking. If this suspicion gains ground -- how is it to affect the future of the U.S. Armed Forces? The Army needs men: it calls for volunteers. Are young Americans likely to enlist if they have to fear that, by doing so, they would jeopardize their

essential rights as citizens of a free country? One of those rights is that, to read an independent, honest, truly informative newspaper -- just the kind of paper The Stars and Stripes, Mediterranean, used to be, before the General's interference.

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