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Waiting For The General.

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Egypt

WAITING FOR THE GENERAL

Major General Lewis H. Brereton, U. S. Commander in the Middle East, gets plenty off his chest in a remarkably frank interview with our Cairo correspondent

BY ERIKA

MANN



Radioed from Cairo.

HAD I known then what I know now, I might not have had the nerve even to apply for an interview with the general. And if by some puckish coincidence I had chosen to put my last question first, it might have remained my last. Upon receiving his answer, I might have departed in a rush.

But this is no way to tell a story. I'd better start with the beginning and recall how, shortly after the historic raid on Rome, I determined to go and see Major General Lewis H. Brereton, Commanding General of the U. S. Army Forces in the Middle East.

I knew that the general, whose Ninth U. S. Air Force had just helped destroy Mussolini's Littorio marshaling yards, would be exceedingly busy, and that two or three days might pass before he'd be able to receive me. While waiting for orders from his headquarters I did not dare to leave Cairo. Whoever called to invite me for tea, show me the Pyramids, or take me for a camel ride was invariably told that I was waiting for the general and consequently unable to accept any social engagements. As time went by and one week spent in expectation was followed by a second, my friends and colleagues started shaking their experienced heads over me.

"You'll never make it, my dear," they said cheerfully.

Momentous events occurred while I was waiting. Il Duce fell. Orel fell, Catania fell, and Badoglio was in the process of falling.

Our own theater of operations, however, was not in the center of events. Colonel Parham, the

public relations officer in charge, rightly assumed a distinct Santa Claus attitude as one fine day he disclosed that something big was cooking in the Middle East. Our excitement was considerable and much hard guesswork was being done. The more ambitious among us were seen to prepare any number of speculative cables, at least one of which, they figured, was bound to hit the nail squarely on the head. The NBC and CBS men arranged for special bookings and everybody got ready to dispatch the news with the utmost velocity.

But the handouts we were given when the great moment had finally come contained no news whatever. Instead, we read a tiresome description of the city of Ploesti and its famous refineries. The actual story, we were told, would break at 8 P. M. Not a thing broke at eight, nor had anything broken at nine thirty, for which time Winston Burdett's radio show had been scheduled. I walked over with him to Radio House and listened to London conversing with Cairo, New York talking to London, and everybody awaiting our news. Winston, unable even to say that the real thing wasn't out yet, spoke briefly on the Italo-German tension in Greece, and we both suffered a little under the thought of how crazy he must seem to Columbia, who'd taken somebody else off the air to make place for his momentous announcement.

At ten the first official communiqué of the spectacular raid on the Ploesti refineries was finally released, and while the success of the enterprise could not yet have been determined, it became clear that the dash and

LIBERTY

Major General Lewis H. Brereton.





On August 1 low-ranging American Liberator bombers blasted Ploesti, Rumania, and struck a major blow at the oil resources of the Axis.

daring shown by the Ploesti raiders was comparable only to the bravery displayed by the English destroyers of the German Eder and Möhne dams. The heroes of Ploesti came and talked to us. Their accounts, delivered in a calm, restrained, and objective way, nevertheless rang with tension and drama. There was no bragging, not even much of that understating idiom in which airmen will describe the most fearful battle as "a bit of trouble" and the most devastating enemy barrage as "a lot of silly stuff flying."

"Artists," said the major who'd led one of the formations, "are fond of depicting air attacks as veritable infernos with all hell breaking loose wherever you look, with planes crashing into each other, planes exploding in mid-air, planes plunging down on burning houses, with red-hot debris being thrown up sky-high, pillars of black smoke and reddish flames shooting upward, and disaster engulfing the whole confounded scene. Well, I've always admired those artists for their gruesome imagination rather than for their love of truth. Real raids don't look like that. I've been in many, and none of them ever did."

"But this Ploesti show came as close to that sort of inferno as anything could. I hadn't thought I'd ever see such hell, nor do I want ever to see it again."

"The heat developed by our fires," said another, "was so intense it created something like a tropical storm which made steady flying kind of difficult. When one of the oil towers exploded, its roof came up dancing on top of a colossal pillar of flames."

It was a moving and rather upsetting experience to listen to those grim young Americans as they tried to describe the indescribable. They looked strained and tired and they

talked in low, slightly veiled voices.

The Ploesti attack was of an utterly new, entirely unheard-of character. Day raids by large formations of planes are rarely executed on a level as low as this was and, more particularly, neither the Liberators nor their crews had ever gone through anything even remotely similar. Months of general preparation and ten days of special training preceded the attack, for which the machines had been equipped with new low-level bomb sights. Despite all this, however, the airmen knew that the ghost Ploesti they had built in the desert and on whose mock refineries they were dropping their dummy bombs was but an impotent shadow, unable to give them a foretaste of what the real Ploesti would be like. Besides, how would the weather behave, and would it permit the whole lot of them to meet over the target at the appointed moment?

IT did not, alas, and while the entire force should have cleared the target area within one minute, the last of the Liberators appeared on the spot thirty minutes after the first group had left. Delayed-action bombs planted by those who had arrived early exploded in the faces of the latecomers.

"It was most unpleasant," one of them said in conclusion, "but then, we knew it would be. We also knew it was necessary and important, and I believe I speak for us all when I say we're satisfied with what we've done."

The others nodded gravely. Then pictures were taken of the group and some of the men tried to smile but didn't quite succeed, nor did any of us feel like molesting them with questions. Quietly we departed.

In my room at Shephard's Hotel, a telephone message awaited me. General Brereton would see me on Friday at 10 A. M.! Needless to say,

I appeared at headquarters at nine thirty sharp. The general, I was informed, had gone out and was not apt to return this morning.

"Swell," I told the abashed aide-de-camp. "I'll wait, then."

While waiting, I tried to remember what I knew of the general. He was fifty-three. His home town was Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. When he was thirteen his family moved to Annapolis, Maryland, where he later attended the U. S. Naval Academy. He graduated in 1911, but soon resigned from the Navy to accept a commission in the Army. His real interest lay in the air, and as early as 1912 he became one of the pioneers of American aviation.

The Distinguished Service Cross, the Croix de Guerre with three palms, and the Legion of Honor are among the many citations he carried home from World War 1. When questioned as to how he earned these honors, he is wont to say, "I was flying like hell to get home and a lot of Huns got in my way."

From 1919 to 1923 he was air attaché at the American Embassy in Paris. Then he felt homesick for the air, and he has been flying ever since. In October, 1941, he was commanding the Third Air Force at Tampa, Florida, but by the end of that month he'd moved to Manila to assume command of the American Air Forces in the Far East. On Christmas morning he took off to join General Wavell in Java, and he arrived at Surabaya just in time for Christmas dinner.

When by the middle of February all hope of holding Java had vanished, Brereton accompanied General Wavell to India. There he re-created his Air Force to strike at the Japs through China. Painfully, gradually his staff reassembled and men and ships were put at his disposal. Not

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WAITING FOR THE GENERAL

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before he had gathered all that was necessary to make an attack successful did he send his men into battle.

On April 3 his Air Force performed its first mission out of India—the successful raid on the Andaman Islands. The raid was led by Brereton in person.

I thought it seemed pretty risky for a general to expose himself to that kind of fun. I must ask him why he'd done it. . . .

Here the aide-de-camp jumped to his feet. I did likewise, and the general—dark, medium-sized, beardless and spectacled—made his hurried entrance. "You may go in," said the ADC, not a minute after the chief had disappeared into his office.

Naturally we talked of Ploesti and I congratulated the general on this new brilliant success.

"Thanks," he said, shrugging his shoulders, "but we really don't know yet and may not for some time to come. All we can say is that it was an honest effort and that considerable damage has been done. Just how considerable remains to be seen."

"You've been planning this for a long time," I said. "May I ask, sir, for how long?"

"We'd failed once," he said. "Remember? Way back in May, 1942. Ever since then this large-scale low-level attack has been under consideration. It has been a trying experience for our men."

"THEY are your men," I inserted, "and they seem to like it. Have you any particular method, any formula for being a good leader?"

"I raise hell with them," he told me, "when they won't do what I want them to do, and pat them on the back when they do. Above all, however, I try to maintain the closest possible contact with them. Continued inspection and moral support are what's needed. Also, you must be ready to take lessons from them and must never ask them to do what you wouldn't be ready to do yourself."

I thought of the Andamans raid and wondered whether he'd participated in any more recent missions.

"Well, yes," he replied hesitantly. "I was over Italy a little while ago, but I don't think that's of much importance really. In fact, it has never been mentioned in the papers. I didn't want it to be. We're all doing that sort of thing simply because it's healthy for the morale of the men. Otherwise we wouldn't have any business to go out there making our co-pilots nervous. I'm all against joy rides on the part of generals, but sometimes it can't be helped."

He smiled, looking like an embarrassed teacher rather than like a commanding general. But what attracted me most was his utter lack of pretension. Not a trace of cageyness or conceit could be found in his

manner, nor was there any of the forbidding reserve often displayed by prominent Europeans. He was refreshingly natural.

"Are you married, sir?" I asked. "Why, yes, indeed," he assured me. "Any children?"

"Two, from my first marriage. They're grown up, though, and I haven't seen them for some time."

I wanted to know where his present wife lived, and learned that she was in the habit of commuting between Dallas and San Antonio, having relatives in both places.

"She's quite good at writing," he said, "and I'm getting my square deal of mail. Yet I never know where she actually is."

It was at this point that I put the question which, had I asked it at an earlier stage, might well have finished me off.

"And what," I ventured, "do you think of girls in uniform?"

"Fortunately," I actually heard him say, "I've had no experience with that particular species."

"Excuse me, sir," I interjected, "but did you say *fortunately*?"

"I did," he confirmed mercilessly, "and, what's more, I don't want any of them around here. Positively not."

There was a little pause during which the general cast a short glance at my own uniformed figure. Then he proceeded to inform me that, to his mind, there were enough civilian jobs which women could and should fill; that all they ought to do was to relieve the greatest possible number of men whose place was now at the front, whereas their place, the women's place, was at home.

But didn't he think, I meekly suggested, that women were all right when it came to recreational work and that in their spare time the boys in the desert would welcome a bit of female attention?

The general remained firm.

"Frankly," he said, "I do not think so at all. I would much rather send my men on leave into centers of civilization, wherever it can be done,

than have them constantly distracted by the presence of the other sex.

"Moreover," he added, "I don't even believe that they themselves particularly care. The more seasoned among them certainly do not. During this past year I've seen a lot of the boys of the Eighth Army, and I can assure you they're quite accustomed by now to their monastic lives. Why, I've hardly ever heard them talk about women. Which doesn't mean that they'd mind a date with a good-looking girl once in a while."

"Is that so?" I mumbled. But I thought it possible that the boys of the Eighth Army had not wished to discuss their girl problems in the presence of an American general. Besides, they were English and perhaps less girl-minded than the Americans—or in a quieter way.

As if he'd read my thoughts, the general continued, "And, mind you, it's the same story with our own chaps. You send them on leave and, next thing you know, they are off on a sight-seeing trip. They'd go up to Palestine or to Eritrea or just to some of the more noteworthy places near here. Of course it's all being arranged for them and wherever they go they're being properly taken care of. Also, there are quite a few American leave camps scattered throughout the Middle East, and on the whole our boys are not having too bad a time even in the absence of female soldiers."

"Thanks, general," I said, "I guess that's all."

ON my way home I ran into a friend of mine.

"Hot," he stated. "Care for some lemon squash?" While we were waiting for it, he said, "Incidentally, here's the news, my dear. According to usually well informed circles, the general won't receive any woman war correspondent."

I gasped. My friend sighed condescendingly. "Sorry, my dear," he said, "but he just won't."

THE END



Leo Sarkis

Dandruff.