

Watch That Beer!

By

Chuck McGinnis

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Major General James M. Gavin, “Jumpin Jim”, was an OK Commander of the VII US Army Corps in Germany. The year was 1953, and while the General had a distinguished World War II record, he was just another of a succession of commanders so far from my post in Regensburg that we took little note of him. The mood in Germany was mildly tense since the senior leadership left no doubt as to their concern for a possible Soviet initiative while the US was focused on our “police action” involvement in Korea. In spite of Korean War demands, The US presence in Germany was being rebuilt, slowly but surely. Inherent in the rebuilding process was the introduction of lots of young, fresh off the farm draftees. Most had never been out of the US, and suddenly here they were, conquering heroes in a foreign land. There was so much to see, and do, and learn. There were Frauleins to meet, Gasthauses to visit, schnitzel to eat, and beer to drink.

Our young hero, (let's call him Joe because I don't know his real name and Bobby Hall has already laid claim to “Bobby”), had arrived quite recently and was deep into the orientation process. He was helped through this by mentors and barracks “friends”. These friends helped him learn about German beer on his first outing into the nearby town; they did this quite solidly, almost vengefully. By the time the group needed to return to their Kaserne (barracks compound), poor old Joe was well gone.

For the uninitiated, let the record show that German beer, on average, is smooth, tasty, beautiful to see, and quite alcoholic by US standards in 1953. One might even conclude that German beer and Bud Light have nothing in common other than the name beer.

Joe's “friends”, in a giggly mood after having downed a few themselves, decided to have a little fun with Joe and while they were at it, with General Gavin, too. They wedged poor Joe between the storm door and the front door of the General's quarters and left him there to sleep it off. The General and his wife had been out at the time Joe was deposited, so they found him upon returning home while trying to get in the front door. An ordinary General, witnessing indisputable evidence of discipline failure, would probably have called the MP's to cart the body away and to hold it until the soldier's hapless commander could reclaim him.

General Gavin was never "ordinary". This was in the old days when commanders had orderlies, aides, drivers, and anybody else needed to allow their full time attention to their military duties. General Gavin called for his enlisted aide, a sergeant who lived at the house, fixed meals and tended to numerous household chores. He directed the sergeant to put Joe to bed in the guest bedroom.

Joe slept solidly until early the next morning when the sergeant awakened him and told him to get dressed, and then come downstairs for breakfast. Though much of the night before was lost on Joe, he was sufficiently aware of his current circumstances to recognize that they were, to say the least, most unusual. He had only a few months of service, but nothing to date prepared him for the gentle instructions from a sergeant. And what's more, nowhere to date had he seen a barracks room that looked anything like the one he was in. He did what he was told and came downstairs fully outfitted in his uniform. In the dining room he found already seated at the table an old guy who was wearing olive drab trousers and a tan shirt. He was pretty clearly also a soldier, but since the old guy wasn't wearing his Ike jacket there was no indication of rank or station. The breakfast was good, a cut or two above mess hall fare; conversation was polite, consisting mostly of Joe answering the old guy's questions.

Finally, the old guy stood up, the sergeant brought him his jacket, and Joe saw all of those bright shiny stars. Whoa! What now? Was he on his way to the stockade, perhaps a subterranean torture chamber, or worse yet, back to the artillery battery orderly room where, having missed bed check, he was sure to face the enormity of raw, military justice? Joe and the General got in the car with those bright red, star encrusted license plates and drove to the Kaserne while every soldier spotted enroute saluted smartly.

Having already told the General to which unit he belonged, Joe wasn't surprised to hear the General direct the driver to take them there. So, it was to be option three — tossed into the pit with all the other gladiators to be consumed by the military justice lions.

If Joe considered his plight as pretty bad, he had nothing on his Battery Commander who, without notice, was suddenly confronted early in the morning by his eminence, the Corps Commander. General Gavin was unbelievably sensitive to these swirling emotions. With evident understanding he spoke to the Battery Commander. "Lieutenant", he said, "I realize that Pvt. Joe missed bed check last night, and while that's normally a pretty serious offense, I hope that just this once you can overlook the violation since he was my houseguest last night." Stammering, the Battery Commander assured the General that he could do that.

General Gavin then turned to Joe and said, "Son, watch out for that German beer." No longer was a run of the mill Corps Commander, "Jumpin' Jim" Gavin welcomed as a true leader

and one deserving of the full respect and affection of every soldier in VII Corps, even those of us in far off Regensburg.

Footnote: "“General Gavin was one of the paratroopers who jumped behind the German lines on D-Day.”

— *Dan O'Connor* —