

Vignettes

Kit Kat Essay by George Meiling

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My essay this evening is about a person who among other things, flunked out of medical school only later to become the dean of one, who was washed out of the Army Air Corps' aviation cadet school yet helped create the independent U.S. Air Force where he became a major general. As a foreign medical student he had to prove to the Nazis he wasn't Jewish; on returning to the states he was investigated by the FBI to insure he wasn't a Nazi. His medical research allowed the Germans to better feed their civilians during World War Two yet part of his war work was to try to thwart that very effort. It should come as no surprise that this individual was my father, Richard Meiling. This is not a biography and certainly not a

hagiography. Rather it focuses on certain experiences which in later times and other contexts had remarkable consequences.

To provide a brief framework: Friday will mark the 104th anniversary of his birth in Springfield Ohio. Of German extraction on both sides he was the middle of three sons of a jeweler. Following graduation from Wittenberg he was accepted at Jefferson Medical School in Philadelphia but failed academically after one year. Next to medicine his second great love was flying. He became an aviation cadet at Randolph Field but failed a check ride. This caused him to be placed in the Army's inactive reserve. Back in Springfield two Wittenberg professors from Germany suggested he go there for medical school. There was no tuition, one merely paid for the individual lectures. In August 1932 he matriculated at Erlangen University. In January 1933 Hitler and the Nazis took power. Erlangen was a protestant university and soon purges of its faculty began. As a consequence he transferred to the

University of Munich which as a Catholic university was able to resist the purges for several years.

During his four years at Munich he had two significant experiences. Vitamin C had only been identified as ascorbic acid in 1928 and research on its effects was in its infancy. My father decided to do his doctoral thesis on the use of Vitamin C as a treatment of pneumonia which at that time was almost universally fatal to patients over 50. He needed lab animals for the research and had to go to Hermann Goering for permission. In addition to his other positions Goering was the chief minister for wild animals. My father got permission from Goering with the condition that he report back in person every three months. He also became friends with some of the minor German nobility who were army officers and with whom he hunted and skied. This provided other opportunities to meet Goring socially.

One of his closest friends was Baron Goggy von Haniel who later was one of the conspirators in the von Stauffenberg plot to assassinate Hitler. When that plot failed, to avoid capture and execution, von Haniel fled to his former prep school, Salem, on the shore of Lake Constance. The headmaster said he could only hide there for 24 hours, so that night von Haniel swam the 8 mile width of Lake Constance to safety in Switzerland.

While his research showed vitamin C to have great preventative, if not curative, benefits, there remained the problem of how to provide it to the population. Germany then had virtually no access to citrus fruit. He discovered that wild rose hips contain by weight 8.5 times the vitamin C of oranges. The government planted wild roses on median strips of the newly built autobahns, and marmalade was made from the hips, providing the population a reliable source of vitamin C.

The second experience in those years involved the Spanish Civil War. Germany used the war as a testing ground not only for weapons but also for tactics. Germany pioneered the tactic of air evacuation of the wounded. They were flown via Italy to Munich for definitive treatment at the university hospital. As a senior medical student my father talked to the casualties and observed the flight operations. In 1937 he became the first American to graduate from Munich with high honors.

Two vignettes of his time in Europe involve Adolf Hitler. He met Hitler twice to speak to, once at the opera and once at a diplomatic function, but neither went beyond small talk. Hitler had only a vague notion of the location of Ohio. A friend asked my father to look after three juniors from Vassar who were visiting Munich. Of course they wanted to see Hitler. My father took them to the Carlton tea room where Hitler frequently had tea. He said we'll get there an hour early, if Hitler is coming, half an hour before six or seven secret policemen will come in,

no one will be allowed in but people can leave. Sure enough that day Hitler arrived and my father told the girls: don't stand up, don't walk toward his table and for god's sake don't think of asking for an autograph.

The second incidence involved a meeting between Hitler and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. Meiling was a stringer for Time Magazine and they wanted a story and picture of Hitler kissing the Duchess's hand. Hitler met them and did **not** kiss her hand. Meiling was there and filed the story, only to see his account edited and Time running an altered picture showing the kiss that didn't occur.

In early 1938 Meiling returned to Ohio to begin his residency at Western Reserve. As the country belatedly prepared for a possible war he was among the first reserve officers to be recalled to active duty in the summer of 1940. After serving as medical establishment commander at five posts he obtained an appointment to Command and General Staff School at Ft.

Leavenworth. This was unusual for a medical officer but he gained a much broader perspective on military strategy and tactics. There his final command problem was to stage an invasion of the Cherbourg peninsula. He used transport planes to fly in artillery and then evacuate wounded soldiers to England. This was deemed superior to the school solution. This study was brought to the attention of Hap Arnold, the commanding general of the Army Air Force.

Arnold had him assigned as assistant to the Air Surgeon, General David Grant, to be the first air evacuation officer.

From today's perspective, when all U.S. conflicts since Korea have involved irregular warfare, with few if any defined battle lines, it's hard to imagine not having air evacuation. But as late as Pearl Harbor conventional wisdom considered air evacuation as dangerous, impracticable, medically unsound, and militarily impossible. I'll pass over the bureaucratic and organizational battles to get air evacuation established and

note a couple of highlights. Meiling determined that regular unmarked transport planes should be used rather than planes designated and marked as Red Cross. This enabled the planes to fly in military materiel

(which aircraft and vehicles identified as Red Cross are prohibited from doing) and fly out the wounded, thus doubling aircraft utilization. The decision to staff each flight with a flight nurse and a medical technician caught the attention of Eleanor Roosevelt who visited Ft. Bowman Kentucky to observe the nurses training. She wrote a dozen columns about it and later Life and Fortune magazines did features.

Air evacuation addresses two military problems: logistics and medical.

In World War Two each soldier required 8 ½ tons of materiel for the first month in a theater and 1 1/2 tons a month thereafter. Every 100 patients required 71 non-combatant

medical care providers. So every patient evacuated from the theater reduced the commander's logistic burden considerably. Medically air evacuation proved faster, safer and led to improved morale. Patients evacuated to the U.S. were sent to the hospital providing definitive care closest to the place from where they had entered active duty. Beginning in the North Africa campaign 1.3 million patients were air evacuated throughout the war. In flight fatalities were reduced from 6 per 100,000 initially to 1.3 per 100,000.

During the Korean conflict my father was Assistant Secretary of Defense in charge of medical affairs for the armed forces. Aided by helicopters and pressurized transports air evacuation continued to advance. Transportation triage dictated that a sick or wounded soldier was treated in theater if he could be returned to combat within 30 days, was air evacuated to Japan if he required 30-60 days and to the U.S. if he

required over 60 days. During the conflict 61,000 were evacuated to the U.S.

From November 1944 until August 1945 Meiling served on the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey and was in charge of its morale division. This examined effects of the allied bombing on German civilians in terms of health care, food, access to housing, and transportation to and from work. Initially the survey members were trained in interrogation techniques by Oxford dons. This included never asking a question that could be answered “yes” or “no” and asking the prisoner what he’d have done in a superior position or what his superiors did wrong. After V-E Day Meiling’s team visited 18 bombed German cities, interviewed survivors and seized German records.

Some of the medical conclusions were counterintuitive. There were no epidemics due to superior German hygiene, a well organized public health service and the bombing eliminating

disease vectors such as rats and other vermin. The vast majority of bomb deaths came from carbon monoxide poisoning rather than blast effect. Underground shelters were especially dangerous in this regard, while the reinforced above ground shelters (some of which still remain) proved very effective. Complications of pregnancy were almost non-existent, largely because of the sharp reduction of sugars in the Germans' diet.

Regarding our bombing my father related this incident which has never been published and can't be verified but which I believe to be true. Late in the war allied leaders were beginning to select their post war headquarters sites. Omar Bradley and Tooey Spaatz (commander of the strategic air forces) both wanted to use Balthasar von Neuman's baroque elector's palace in Wurzburg. Their dispute was referred up to Eisenhower who decided in favor of Bradley. When he heard that Spaatz said: "tell Brad not to go there for 48 hours".

The next night, March 16, Wurzburg (which was not on the allies 50 city target list and had not been attacked) was heavily bombed and the palace all but destroyed. When I was last there the palace was still being repaired and I saw a small sign stating that funding for the restoration was provided by the US Air Force. Draw your own conclusion.

To complete the morale survey Meiling participated in interrogating high ranking Nazi officials (including Goering and Ribbentrop) and doctors in preparation for the Nuremburg trials. This, named Operation Ashcan, took place at the spa hotel in Mondorf Luxembourg. At his initial interrogation Goering immediately recognized my father and suggested as he was fluent in German they dispense with the enlisted interpreter. By then we had learned the Russians had bugged the interrogation rooms so for two days he and Goering talked in the hotel garden next to a waterfall. Goering was still convinced the Western Allies would come to their senses and

appoint him air marshal to lead the joint attack on Russia.

While at Mondorf one evening two female Russian officers came to his room and asked him to give them medicine for menstrual cramps. Since he always wore a plain uniform with no insignia he asked why they thought he was a doctor. Oh, they said we have complete dossiers on everyone here.

Meiling was asked to remain for the Nurenburg trials but declined on the advice of Senator Robert Taft who felt a physician should not be connected to trials based on ex post facto laws.

While retaining his reserve commission he returned to Western Reserve, completed his residency, became board certified in Ob-Gyn and joined the medical faculty at Ohio State.

He served on the first Hoover Commission to reorganize the executive branch. For the military it created the Department of Defense to which the Departments of the Army, Navy and

newly independent and equal Air Force were subordinate. In what he believed to be his greatest accomplishment he succeeded against the wishes of both Generals Marshall and Eisenhower in creating an independent Air Force medical service. It's hard to imagine that the amazing strides achieved in air and space medicine would have occurred had there been a single medical service branch led in effect by Army doctors.

In 1949 President Truman asked him to be the Assistant Secretary of Defense for medical affairs. At the interview my father said: "Mr. President, where I came from in Clark County I was 16 before I ever met a Democrat." President Truman replied: "Dr. Meiling, I didn't call you to Washington to **vote** for me, I'm calling you here to **work** for me."

He assumed the position in July 1949 at a time when the so-called Revolt of the Admirals was in full force. This was mainly directed against Secretary Louis Johnson whom high ranking admirals felt was favoring the Air Force. It all spilled over into

medical affairs. Rear Admiral Joel Boone, who had received the Medal of Honor as a medical officer in World War I, was appointed executive officer to Meiling. Boone felt the roles should be reversed as he was 19 years Meiling's senior and outranked him. When this came to a head Meiling had Boone removed, prompting a Time Magazine article: "Meiling fires Medal of Honor winner".

From 1949 until 1952 he served under Secretaries Louis Johnson and George Marshall for whom he had the highest respect. Relationships with Eisenhower remained a bit cool. It was interesting that he was promoted to Brigadier General (the first reserve medical officer to attain flag rank) under Truman, had eight lean years under Eisenhower and was on President Kennedy's first promotion list to Major General.

While serving in the Defense Department Meiling went to all the nuclear tests at Eniwetok and Nevada Flats. Subsequently he was criticized for sending troops into the bomb site

following the detonation. The purpose was to determine whether the detonation would deny the site to the enemy. It would not, as he learned for he personally went to every site – at Eniwetok he arrived 20 minutes after the blast and stayed on site for four hours. At that time we were not as aware of long-term effects of radiation exposure as we are now.

However, note he went to every test site, not just one as the troops did, but suffered no adverse effects.

He did have one historic interaction with Eisenhower. In 1950 he along with Senator Nixon was a delegate to a World Health Organization Convention in Geneva. He met Nixon's plane and took the Senator to dinner. He told Nixon he was going to Fontainebleu to see Eisenhower who was then head of NATO.

Nixon asked if he could accompany him as he'd never met Eisenhower. My father said he'd have to see if Eisenhower would extend Nixon an invitation. He called General Gruenther, Eisenhower's chief of staff who arranged a meeting.

At the meeting Eisenhower asked them who they thought might be a presidential candidate. Nixon replied he could think of several possibilities, my father said he was a friend and supporter of Senator Taft who would definitely be nominated.

When he returned to Washington Marshall immediately took him to see the President who wanted to know what Eisenhower and Nixon talked about. He told the President what they discussed and Truman said: "Everybody comes back and tells me that General Eisenhower is getting ready to run for President. They all have the same report."

After Eisenhower was elected he asked Meiling to become Assistant Secretary of HEW, and later President Nixon asked him to head HEW. Both times he said he would only return to Washington for a position in the Defense Department.

So my father stayed in Columbus first as Associate Dean and from 1961 to 1974 as Dean of the OSU Medical School. Most

people associate his tenure with the building program that was unprecedented until now. While 18 medical buildings were built at a cost of \$150 million 1970 dollars, he felt his greatest contribution was in changing graduate education. He took a European approach that students were responsible for their own learning. The faculty wasn't responsible for teaching; they were responsible for helping students learn. One example of this was extensive use of computer-assisted instruction.

Among other things he obtained funding for the first endowed chairs in any OSU college and increased research grants from \$200,000 in 1960 to \$12 million in 1972. There were problems too. The stackless computerized retrieval library was too advanced for its time and the final years saw a bitter fight over President Enarson's practice plan for the medical faculty.

Enarson wanted to have the medical faculty donate their private practice fees to the university. By Ohio law then no

state employee could be paid more than the governor. Without private practice income to augment a restricted salary, it would have been impossible to recruit top medical teaching talent. Although it was eventually resolved after Meiling retired, the six-year dispute proved tremendously disruptive to the medical school causing many faculty defections.

Meiling and Enarson were philosophic opposites. When Enarson first came to Ohio State he wanted to meet with Meiling off campus. Meiling invited him to the Columbus Club for lunch which ended with Enarson saying: "Dick don't invite me to a private club again, I don't believe in them and I won't come". Essentially Enarson believed in equality in education; Meiling believed in excellence. He felt equality was fine in elementary school, but thereafter excellence must be paramount. At the university level striving for equality for all 18 colleges will produce nothing and the only way to achieve

international reputation is with excellence. He made
“excellence in medicine” the motto of the medical school.

But in all I hope you will agree these military and medical
vignettes portray a most interesting life, little of which could
have been expected from its beginnings.