

Adventures in the Written Word: Writing It  
March, 2025

Whenever I poke around looking for something in my attic or basement, I come across an item I had forgotten existed. Same thing in the virtual attic or basement: archived files. Here's an article I wrote about five or six years ago, from information when I was editing a Holocaust memoir. I shopped the article around to a couple of magazines where I thought it would fit nicely, but none of the editors accepted it. When I found it a couple of days ago, my first thought was submit it to more magazines of military, Pittsburgh, or Holocaust history, with some rewrites to align it more closely with each particular publication's needs. That's the kind of thing I was doing a lot 30 or more years ago. But nowadays I've moved on, and I do not at all care whether the thing is published or not. I do think it's a good example of my work, and worthy of being read by someone other than myself, so I'm sharing it here, saving myself the bother of looking up the name of an editor, writing a cover letter, and all that.

Two Heroes

In the summer of 1982, Lieutenant General James M. Gavin, USA (Ret.) received a letter from a man he'd never met. Reading that letter took the old soldier 38 years back, and an ocean away.

In that summer of 1944, with the war in Europe at its most harrowing, Gavin had just been promoted to major general, and placed in command of the 82nd Airborne Division. At 37, he was the youngest man to command a US Army division since the Civil War. Gavin was a soldier's soldier. He carried an M-1 rifle like his fellow infantrymen, not the carbine favored by officers. He dug his own foxhole. He was called "The Jumping General," because when his men jumped out of airplanes, he jumped with them.

The fourth and final jump for the 82nd came in September, 1944, in an operation named Market Garden, aimed at seizing and holding key roads and bridges far behind German lines in the Netherlands. When the initiative stalled, the 82nd crossed the Waal river and took a strategic bridge, in an action war correspondent Bill Downs described as, "a single, isolated battle that ranks in magnificence and courage with Guam, Tarawa, Omaha Beach." After the operation turned into a defensive stand, the 82nd, built for quick-strike offense, moved behind the lines to France.

Then, on December 16, 1944, the Germans launched a surprise offensive through the Ardennes Forest. Four days later, the 82nd, still battered from the Market Garden struggle, was again at the front, stubbornly holding off three Nazi Divisions in what came to be known as the Battle of the Bulge. On Christmas Eve, down from 20,000 men to 8,750 and facing 43,000 Nazi soldiers with armor and artillery, the 82nd was forced to withdraw, for the first time in its history.

Nine days later, they counterattacked, overrunning and destroying the German 9th SS Panzer Division and the elite 62nd Volksgrenadiers.

The Allied stand at the Battle of the Bulge was the beginning of the end of the war.

The young general's success was remarkable, but it fit into the pattern of his life. Orphaned at a very young age, Gavin was adopted into a Mount Carmel, Pennsylvania, coal mining family. At age 10, he took on two newspaper delivery routes. At 14, he quit school and began working full time. Sensing that he probably had no future in Mount Carmel other than coal mining, Gavin ran away to New York on his 17th birthday, March 22, 1924. Ten days later, after a bit of deception regarding his eligibility, he was sworn into the United States Army, headed for Panama.

Gavin was sorely aware of his lack of education, and began reading everything in the camp library. In September, he was accepted into an Army school in which the best graduates were allowed to apply to West Point. He excelled there, and entered the Academy in the summer of 1925. Because he was a high-school dropout going to class side by side with elite prep-school graduates, he developed a habit of rising at 4:30 every morning to study in the bathroom, the only place with enough light for reading. He graduated and received his commission in 1929. Beneath his photograph in the Academy's yearbook, his classmates tagged him with a respectful nod to his unconventional history, "The cadet who has already been a soldier."

Through his early postings, Gavin expressed deep concern that the Army was still stuck with the equipment and tactical mindset of World War I. When the Army decided to begin training paratroopers, in August, 1941, Captain Gavin commanded one of the first provisional companies. He started reading everything he could find on military organization and practices of other countries, and began submitting memos to his superiors. By October, his abilities had caught the attention of the colonel in command of the program, and Gavin was promoted to major, and named the operations and training officer. One of his first actions was writing *Tactics and Technique of Air-Borne Troops*, which became the blueprint for US Army airborne organization, training, equipment, and tactics. After the US entered the war in December, 1941,

Gavin was tasked with helping convert the 82nd Infantry into the 82nd Airborne, the first division of its type. The division consisted of two glider regiments and one Parachute Infantry Regiment, the 505th. Gavin was promoted to colonel, and placed in command of the 505th. Gavin trained his regiment extremely hard, and led from the front. He participated alongside his men in every exercise, and established the still-honored airborne tradition that the highest-ranking officer is the first one out the door of the airplane, and the last one in chow line.

(In his memoir, *On to Berlin*, Gavin recalled an incident in which he was perhaps too much of a "soldier's soldier," and not enough of a commander. A critical portion of the US military's funding came from War Bonds, and soldiers themselves were heavily encouraged to buy them. Gavin planned to bring in a stripper covered in taped-on bonds, and allow the men to pluck and buy them. News of the plan found its way up the chain of command, and the event was canceled. In retrospect, Gavin realized that Easter Sunday was probably not the best date for scheduling the affair.)

On July 4th, 1943, Gavin became the first American soldier to jump into battle from an airplane, as he led his regiment into behind-the-lines support of the invasion of Sicily. The effective potential of airborne assault was apparent, and Gavin was promoted to brigadier general and made assistant commander of the 82nd Airborne Division. The 82nd's second combat jump, into Salerno on the Italian mainland, came in September.

The unit's third combat jump was on the night of June 6, 1944. Despite bad weather and German anti-aircraft fire, the 505th jumped accurately, and captured a key area in support of the next dawn's assault on Utah Beach. Gavin was given command of the division, and promoted to

major general. Three months later came the Market Garden jump, the redeployment into France, and the Bulge.

After the Battle of the Bulge, the final outcome of the war was no longer in doubt. There were battles to be fought and lives to be saved or lost, but the Germans were retreating on all fronts. Fittingly, it was Gavin and the 82nd who performed the final significant act of the war in Europe. The Germans halted their hasty retreat, and made a stand at the Elbe River. Field Marshal Sir Bernard Montgomery, commanding Anglo-Canadian forces, told US General Omar Bradley that German opposition was too great to cross the river. The 82nd Airborne crossed it on May 2, 1945, moved 36 miles in one day, and captured over 100,000 German soldiers, effectively ending the war at a Mecklenberg village called Ludwigslust. After a brief negotiation in Berlin, Germany formally surrendered five days later.

Many years later, then-retired General Gavin recalled the shock of what came next, in his memoir, *On to Berlin*.

Gavin learned that the mayor of Ludwigslust, his wife, and their daughter had killed themselves. “It was difficult to understand why, when the war came to an end, these three would commit suicide. It was two days later that we discovered the reason.

“One could smell the Wobelein Concentration Camp before seeing it. And seeing it was more than a human being could stand. Even after three years of war it brought tears to my eyes. Living skeletons were scattered about, the dead distinguished from the living only by the blue-black color of their skin compared to the somewhat greenish skin, taut over the bony frames of the living. There were hundreds of dead about the grounds and in the tarpaper shacks. In the corner of the stockade area was an abandoned quarry into which the daily stacks of cadavers were bulldozed. It was obvious they could not tell many of the dead from the living.” Gavin estimated that about a quarter of the 4,000 prisoners had died of starvation during the final weeks of the war. During this time, the mayor had refused to distribute any food from the large reserve he controlled.

Gavin moved with the speed and efficiency which had marked his life and career. “[A]s quickly as we could organize it, hundreds of cots were placed in a hangar at a nearby airfield. Doctors were brought in and intravenous feedings began. It was a sad sight, and I went by the hangar almost daily until the people were ready for more solid feeding and movement. The dead we buried in the park in front of the Palace, where we required the leading German citizens to dig the graves and place the bodies in them. The entire population of the town was required to attend the burial service.”

“So we had come to the end of the war in Europe.”

One of the prisoners clinging to life was young Mieczyslaw Goldman, a 22-year-old Polish Jew who had survived the Łódź Ghetto and Auschwitz. It was his letter, a letter of thanks for his life, which James Gavin held in his hand in June, 1982.

In the 1970s, Goldman recorded his story onto audiotape, during free minutes in his busy day as a successful Pittsburgh jeweler. These scattered recollections have been organized into a memoir, *Perseverance: One Holocaust Survivor’s Journey from Poland to America*, by his surviving

daughter, Lee Goldman Kikel, along with her own memories of their happy family life. In this book, Goldman shines more light on the atrocities Gavin had seen, and on the liberation.

A young man learning the metalworking trade before his imprisonment, Goldman was spared from the death chambers to work in Nazi factories—in the Ghetto, and later in Auschwitz. By the winter of 1944-1945, death was near. “It was winter, and after a month without shoes and no coats except little blue jackets and pants, most of us got very weak. But still we had to go and work. . . . We got very little food, one soup a day and ten grams of bread. We were actual skeletons and they started calling us *Musselmänner* [German for Muslims, which for some reason became slang for concentration camp prisoners suffering from starvation and exhaustion, and resigned to death].”

Goldman lost toes to frostbite, and was still forced to work. In March, 1945, as the Allies closed in, the Nazis did everything possible to prevent liberation of the prisoners. Goldman and other survivors were moved farther behind the lines, first to Ravensbrück, and finally to Wöbbelin.

“We were lying on the floor, in sand and hay, of a big barn with no doors. You could feel the spring weather. All they handed out was a half-cup of water if you could catch it and we were in the worst mess by this time. Nobody thought we would actually survive. Almost all were dead. I was there from the end of April to May 2, 1945, when we were liberated by American troops.

“It started on May 2. We knew that because the guards talked about what date it was and were running around stripping off their epaulets. We started hearing artillery fire, and saw the SS officers, and other Germans who used to watch us, ripping the chevrons from their uniforms and running. All of a sudden we heard a lot of noise and shooting. We later found out that it was the US Army’s 82nd Airborne Division. . . In the afternoon, the Americans walked in. They brought trucks and took people who couldn’t move at all to a field hospital. I was one of them.”

Goldman remembered getting water, and a one-inch slice of bread. He was given pajamas, and a cot to sleep on. Besides his missing toes, he had tuberculosis and a collapsed lung, and needed many transfusions. He vividly remembered the kindness of individual Americans, like a redheaded nurse who was especially vigilant. One soldier performed a small act of kindness which Goldman never forgot. “One American, he told me he was Greek, came over and through translation gave me a shaving kit. But I couldn’t shave; I couldn’t move my arms. I was too weak to shave or do much of anything. It was a beautiful gesture though. He hugged me and kissed me. They were marvelous, these people.”

After five years of treatment, red tape, and confusion in the chaos of postwar Europe, Mieczyslaw Goldman achieved his dream: emigration to America. Under his adopted American name of Melvin Goldman, he found his way to the metalworking city of Pittsburgh, worked hard, learned English, built a successful business, married, had a daughter, and truly achieved the American dream.

“Then one nice day in 1956, it happened, what I had looked forward to. The greatest joy! I went to the federal building to be sworn in as a US citizen. . . . I had a lot of hope. In the years of my life here, my first time to be called an American citizen.”

Goldman’s memoir chronicles an almost unbelievable journey, from a happy, prosperous childhood, to the death and destruction of nearly everyone and everything he had known, to the challenge of recovery.

Just as miraculous as Goldman’s physical survival is the survival of his humanity. He somehow maintained a positive outlook, a belief in the goodness of people, and a profound

gratitude. It was this gratitude which prompted him to write his letter to General Gavin, in June of 1982. Gavin's letter in reply became one of Goldman's cherished possessions.

In that reply, Gavin exhibited some of the qualities which had informed his entire life and career. He deflected Goldman's gratitude from himself to the men of the 82nd Airborne, expressed his shock at discovering the camp, and heartily congratulated Goldman on his citizenship.

Concluding his epic memoir *On to Berlin*, the old general didn't choose to leave the reader with a reminder of the hardships, the heroism, or the death. He ended with a reminder of what the war had really been about.

"It had been a long and costly journey, and when we overran the concentration camps and looked back with a better understanding of where we had been, we knew it had been a journey worth every step of the way."