

Counterpoint to Combat: The Education Of Airborne Commander James M. Gavin

By David Hein

Seventy years ago, on the night of July 9–10, 1943, COL James M. (Jumpin' Jim) Gavin, commander of the 505th Parachute Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, began a tough assignment: a combat jump on Sicily, Italy, six hours ahead of the amphibious landings of Operation Husky. Gavin and his 3,000 paratroopers—not only infantry but also engineers, artillery, medics and signal corpsmen—were to disrupt enemy communications and movements, seize strategic terrain (including high ground and road junctions outside the ancient town of Gela), and thereby help prevent Axis troops from launching effective counterattacks against LTG George S. Patton Jr.'s invading Seventh Army. In his words of encouragement to the troopers of the 505th, COL Gavin expressed the severity of this challenge:



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Background: Troops from the 82nd Airborne Division execute a jump during a demonstration in North Africa leading up to the invasion of Sicily, Italy. Above: Then-MG James M. (Jumpin' Jim) Gavin.

Right: COL Gavin and his troops prepare to board a C-47 bound for Sicily. Bottom right: A map illustrates the Allied plan for the invasion of Sicily and Axis dispositions.

The term *American parachutist* has become synonymous with courage of a high order. Let us carry the fight to the enemy and make the American parachutist feared and respected through all his ranks. Attack violently. Destroy him wherever found. I know you will do your job.

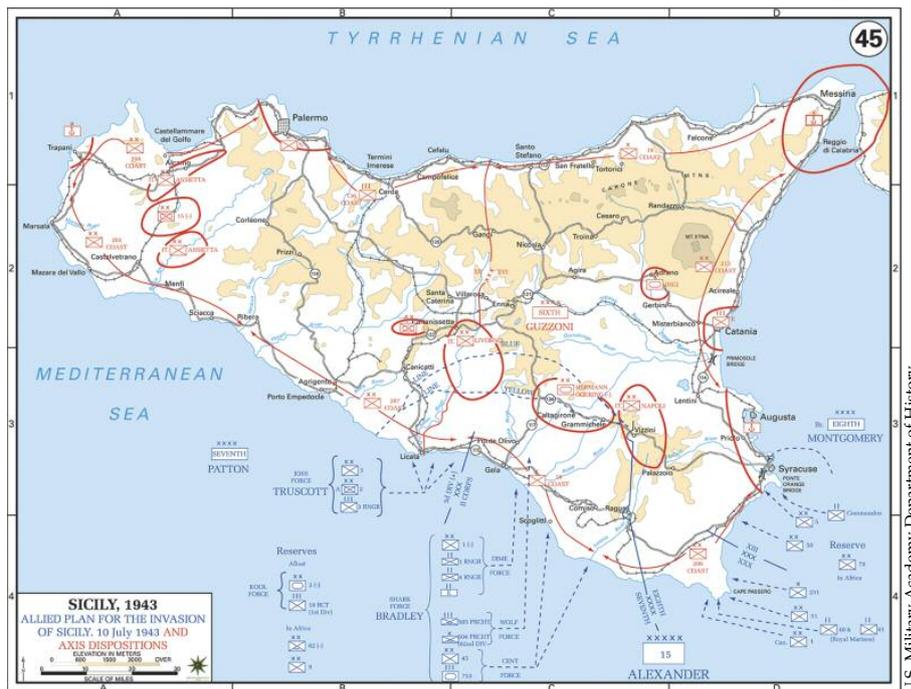
Taking off from Tunisia in C-47 Dakotas, Gavin and his men were to fly to Malta and then dogleg to the left, landing along the southwestern coast of Sicily.

This maneuver would coincide with a momentous dogleg turn in Gavin's life and career. Everything before this turning point had been about getting ready: education for leadership. Everything afterward, for hard months on end, would be about testing in combat: the real final exams.

The two turnings, however, although similar, were unlike each other in one important respect: Gavin's physical journeys took him always forward, moving to the sound of the guns. His interior journey regularly found him circling back to the first phase of his life's work, for he never jettisoned this period of learning. Sparked by curiosity and aspiration, Gavin manifested an enduring engagement with education.

Quite possibly the illegitimate son of Irish immigrants, Gavin was adopted at 23 months and grew up, bright and increasingly restless, in Mount Carmel, Pa. Desperate to escape from the rages of his hard-drinking mother and from the vocational path foreshadowed by his coal-miner father, Gavin ran away from home, taking the night train to Manhattan. As a boy in Mount Carmel, he had "imperiled" his Catholic soul by reading books in the library of

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a Protestant church, had risked arrest by surreptitiously removing books from a local bookstore and then returning them at the end of that day's paper route, and now wanted more than what this town, lacking even a public library, could offer him. He left on his 17th birthday, March 22, 1924, and shortly thereafter, under the required age for enlistment even with parental consent, raised his hand to take the oath, becoming a private in the U.S. Army. Making it to West Point on the advice of a helpful sergeant, Gavin would need to rise at 4 A.M. twice a week so he could study in the basement latrines—the only place where a light bulb burned—to make up for lost time and lost opportunities.

History buffs and military professionals alike know that commanders' educational backgrounds—not just their battles—make fascinating subjects for study. George C. Mar-

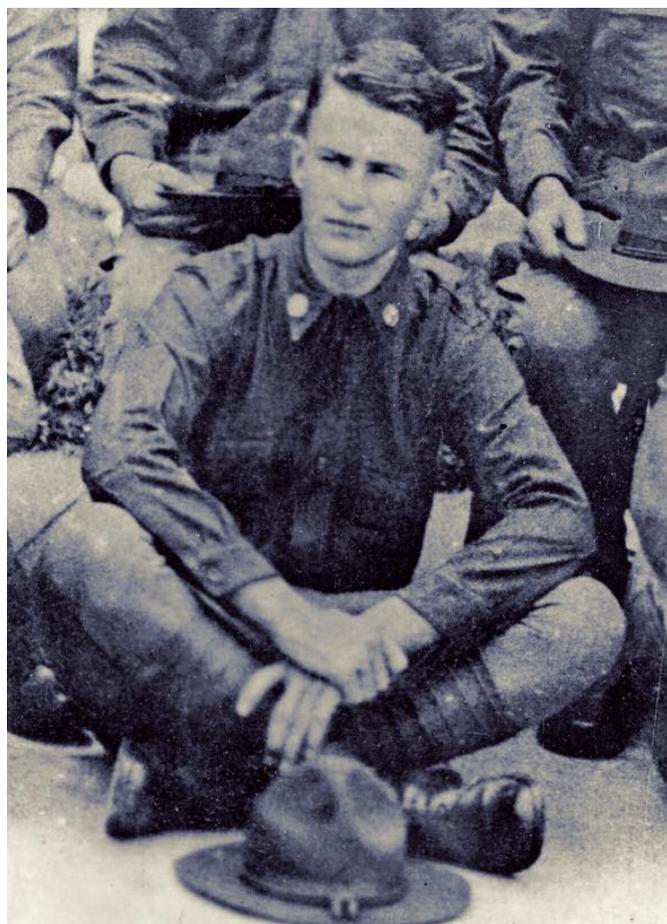
shall, for example, was devoted to the Virginia Military Institute. The school accomplished its primary objective: building character through military discipline. Nevertheless, Marshall did not respect his alma mater as an academic institution. Uninspired by his instructors, he was a poor student. The unimaginative pedagogy of the institute—learning through rote memorization—did not suit him at all. At Fort Benning, Ga., where he was head of the Infantry School from 1927 to 1932, he embraced methods that combined the inculcation of habits of attention and industry with practical, real-world exercises. He took his students over miles of terrain and then at lunchtime had them draw maps of the ground they had covered. He used large-scale maneuvers as, in his phrase, a “combat college for troop leading” and thereby discovered who had the right stuff for command.

From 1922 to 1924, when Dwight D. (Ike) Eisenhower undertook an informal but intensive seminar in military science and the humanities with his Panama Canal Zone mentor, BG Fox Conner, he became a more penetrating student. Leading Eisenhower through the works of such authors as Clausewitz (Eisenhower read *On War* three times), Plato, Tacitus and Nietzsche, BG Conner, like a rigorous Oxford don, would interrogate his pupil about a text’s meaning and implications. He nurtured in Eisenhower the skill of thinking laterally—for example, discerning connections between a Shakespearean play and modern war. Under his mentor’s guidance, Eisenhower learned to write clear field orders, and BG Conner cultivated the future European Theater of Operations commander’s reason and imagination for the challenges of coalition warfare, teaching him some applied psychology, including the art of persuasion.

Like Marshall, Gavin viewed infantry training as a way to enhance—not obliterate—each trooper’s distinctive abilities and thus encourage individual initiative. Treat soldiers as human beings with their own identities—not just as anonymous ranks in close-order drills—and a commander could ask anything of them. Like Eisenhower, Gavin plunged into the history and problems of the profession of arms, studying challenges from every angle and testing his ideas in combat. Gavin’s career leaped forward in 1942, when he combined what he had learned about German and Soviet work with paratroopers and gliders with what he had gained from his own experiences to write the U. S. Army’s first manual on the tactics and techniques of airborne warfare.

In truth, the story of Jumpin’ Jim Gavin’s formation and rise is at least as remarkable as Marshall’s or Eisenhower’s. In its relation to the experience of combat, education became the critical counterpoint for Gavin: a distinct, ongoing melodic line that developed in interaction with the dominant melody.

In his *War and Peace in the Space Age*, published in 1958, Gavin introduces the main theme and its counterpoint in his description of the Sicily campaign. On July 10, 1943, after many of the C-47s overflew the Malta dogleg, resulting in missed landing zones and the wide dispersion of paratroopers, Gavin—having landed south of Vittoria, nearly



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Gavin was only 17 when he enlisted in the U.S. Army. Here, he is a young private, circa mid-1920s.

30 miles from Gela—set out with a handful of men in search of his combat team’s objective. Twenty-four hours after landing in Sicily, he recognized that the first day’s fighting was “an absolute shambles.” His team was scattered, possibly destroyed; he was still largely in the dark even about his own location, not to mention the enemy’s; and worst of all, he was gripped by the disheartening awareness not only that his role in this campaign as hand-picked leader of the parachute assault forces might end in dismal failure but also that the whole idea and program of airborne combat might quickly be seen as amounting to, as he put it, “just so much nonsense.”

But he re-collected himself. He listened to the counterpoint that sounded just beneath the principal theme of confusion and disillusionment. Gavin knew he had physical courage, but moral courage was harder to maintain. It “comes from the soul,” he believed, “from confidence ... in what one is doing.” He defined moral courage as the power that enables a commander to induce troops to act contrary to their natural instincts, such as holding a position against seemingly impossible odds, and he first had to consolidate it within his own gut.

Gavin later wrote that this capacity was bolstered that evening on Sicily by recalling “my upbringing and ... what I had learned as a cadet at West Point.” Facing “confusion and



Then-MG Gavin (right) speaks with MG Matthew B. Ridgeway before an award ceremony in Belgium in 1945.

utter despair” required a counterthrust of memory to summon meaning, purpose, confidence and courage. Gavin is touching the nerve of an experience still deeply felt, not grabbing a rhetorical device ready to hand, when he says: “This [what we learned at West Point] I had to remember. I must remember. I must remember West Point. ... I must remember and I did remember.”

He remembered what he needed to hold in mind continuously over succeeding days, for on July 11 he was to gather his troopers and their underpowered weapons to face the soldiers and Tiger tanks of the *Hermann Göring* Division at the top of a slight rise known as Biazzo Ridge, key terrain southeast of Gela and the Acate River. Drawing strength from his knowledge of the Civil War Battle of Shiloh—during which MG Ulysses S. Grant refused to leave the field and eventually prevailed—Gavin launched attack and counterattack, striving to win this fight—one of the bloodiest of the Sicily campaign—“by simply refusing to give up the battlefield,” as he put it years afterward. In the midst of this battle, his words were more forceful: “We’re staying on this ... ridge,” he shouted, “no matter what happens!”

His troopers’ ultimate success in this effort and its role in the larger battle of Sicily are well-known. Gavin was awarded his first Distinguished Service Cross. Familiar, too, is his career thenceforward—Salerno, Normandy, Nijmegen, the Ardennes, the Hürtgen Forest, and on to Berlin. He became the youngest American major general of World War II

and the youngest division commander since George Armstrong Custer in the Civil War.

And his later career? Haunted after Biazzo Ridge for decades by the painful losses his command sustained there, Gavin told his daughter in a letter home that he hoped to cloister himself in a monastery after the war and witness no more death and destruction. Instead, the post-war years saw him engaged in more planning, leading and critical thinking at the Pentagon, at the research and consulting firm Arthur D. Little Inc., at the vexing intersection of political and military affairs. Gavin supported the desegregation of the Army, pioneered the development of air mobility by the U.S. military, served as ambassador to France, and presented a judicious critique of his country’s strategy in Vietnam.

Sicily, however, remains the best place to recall the source of Gavin’s drive, for this proving ground was where he himself remembered not only West Point but also his difficult upbringing and his initial motivation for gaining admission to the Military Academy.

Gavin possessed essential prerequisites for success, foremost among them the drive to aspire, to gain the skills he knew he lacked, to exercise discipline and self-mastery (much more important than self-esteem), and then to keep working to gain a better understanding of his

calling. He took no shortcuts. He made no excuses. He got the job done. Crucially—he did not allow his circumstances to hold him back. The people he grew up with, he could see, had “no tradition of zealotry and the secret of education at all.” The secret of education is indeed that persistent zealotry. It is the counterpoint of Gavin’s heroic conduct and praiseworthy career. ★

Recommended Reading

Atkinson, Rick, *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943–1944*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007)

Booth, T. Michael, and Spencer, Duncan, *Paratrooper: The Life of Gen. James M. Gavin* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994)

Fauntleroy, Barbara Gavin, *The General and His Daughter: The Wartime Letters of General James M. Gavin to His Daughter Barbara* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007)

Gavin, James M., *War and Peace in the Space Age* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958)

LoFaro, Guy, *The Sword of St. Michael: The 82nd Airborne Division in World War II* (Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2011)