

Major General Clarence Ransom “Daddy” Edwards

Clarence Ransom Edwards was the 3020th graduate of West Point in 1883 with the distinction of being the 52nd graduate in a class of 52 cadets. As Major General Harbord stated in his eulogy on General Edwards, “He was tall, slender and erect, a splendid horseman, handy with his fists, a good shot, a good dancer, a handsome and soldierly young officer.”¹ He had a remarkable career experiencing all major campaigns that the US Army was assigned from the southwest United States, presidential funeral teams, campaigns in the Philippines where he earned three silver citations [silver star], and on to service in the Philippines as chief of staff joining Mr. William Howard Taft in a capacity of advisor. It was his association with Taft that shaped his later career as a general officer. He made rank ahead of peers and became Chief of the Office of Insular Affairs. Returning the United States Edwards worked in Washington, D.C. as military advisor to President Taft—a position that suggested Edwards was on the track to assume sought after chief of staff of the U.S. Army position. Edwards acquired military command along the Mexican border, Hawaii and the Panama Canal Zone. When America entered the war, Clarence Edwards became a Major General and assumed command of the department of the North-east, responsible for military development in New England. It was to establish his legacy both professionally and personally for the remainder of his life.² In 1917 Edwards reconstituted the New England National Guard into the 26th Division. It was a major challenge, for New England boasted the greatest legacy of any militia in the nation—the longest serving force anywhere in the United States.

Edwards’ relations with French leadership kept with military decorum. He was deferential to *général* Passaga throughout the entire time they were at the southern Woëvre front. His manner of communication reflected a style that became his earmark. “If I may be so bold, in view of what I understood was our common mind on the general principles, this is not the kind of a plan that appeals to me to meet the general principle of defense or the present emergency.” reflected his manner—never to the point and tagging reinforcing statements to every utterance.³

Edwards was remembered as a blunt, matter-of-fact soldier with absolutely no tact. He spoke his mind immediately—a trait that endeared him to his soldiers but quickly alienated him with the seniors at Chaumont. Edwards was quick to decide when it came to taking decisions from his staff. As if to counter Malin Craig’s assertions of neglect, Edwards constantly visited the front lines, speaking to his men, getting to know them, getting to like them. He was called the “Old Man” by some, “Daddy” by others—but never to his face. A real affection developed over the time he commanded the Yankee Division.⁴ Edwards was determined to put a great *esprit de corps*, a “soul” into his Division. Although a strict disciplinarian he mean to treat his men like human beings.⁵ General Edwards looked after his men and those who supported his division. He used to come by Balloon Company 2 when the men were eating chow. Edwards told the soldiers, “At ease, don’t get up men! Are you getting enough to eat?” and leave without requiring

¹ “Address of Major-General James G. Harbord at Memorial Service for General Edwards on April 5th,” *Yankee Doings*, 1931.

² Harbord at Memorial Service for General Edwards on April 5th,” *Yankee Doings*, 1931.

³ General Edwards letter to General Passaga, 6 April 1918, Box 22, 26th Division, RG 120, NARA.

⁴ du Boisrouvray, 348.

⁵ Kelly, 120.

the standing at attention or giving the required salute. One private remembered, “Our Lieutenants could have taken lessons from him.”⁶ When the Sweetheart of the AEF, Elsie Janis, arrived with her mother to provide song and dance performances, Edwards and his staff played the perfect hosts, providing tours and allow Elsie to meet as many soldiers near the front as possible, to include firing an artillery projectile at the Germans. At one concert at Boucq, Edwards came and stood with his men, making the point by his actions that he was a soldier like them and shared their experience, never once taking the chair set for his viewing.⁷ As one private exclaimed, “Medals of honor? We didn’t need them. Who could yearn for decorations knowing that his general held such an opinion of his men and had told the world about it?”⁸

Edwards made his men the priority when dealing with other seniors. *Commandant* Alain du Boisrouvray, French Military Mission’s liaison to the 26th Division, recalled a conversation with Edwards while the 26th Division was at the Chemin des Dames. “My men are tired having spent five weeks in the trenches. They have patrolled, they have been subjected to bombardment, they had experienced gas. It is time to have them sent to the rear. You helped us get to the front line. Help us leave.” Du Boisrouvray went to *général* de Maud’huy with Edwards’ request. “My general, the Americans want rest.” De Maud’huy was smoking furiously and answered, “Are they in the war or are they not?” *Commandant* du Boisrouvray replied, “If the German offensive occurs here, the state that the Americans are in will not allow the enemy to be stopped. We will not fail in America to accuse the French of having sacrificed their allies!” *Général* de Maud’huy thoughtfully puffed on his pipe and assumed a pensive air. The 26th Division was allowed to depart the front line on 18 February.⁹

Major General Edwards attention to care for his soldiers was exemplified by a CONFIDENTIAL AND PERSONAL TALK letter to all organization commanders, particularly the company commanders. It provided an insight on the man and allowed his soldiers to better know and later love the general they called Daddy. He started off with “Our conditions of service and occupation of this sector in view of what we have gone through, have given me much concern. It goes without saying that my sympathies are with the soldier, especially those in the mud. On account of the excellent spirit of this division and the battle conditions that we have faced, men in the advanced positions keep themselves on the alert, even sometimes when it is not necessary, during the night. They do not get enough rest. After a while body and soul must succumb. These same conditions obtained with our Allies at the commencement of the war, and we are going through this practical experience. Officers and men must get rest, and conditions are bettering and settling down....My desire is to get these men deloused, cleaned up, and let them sleep and restore nature....The principle to have in mind is that of the tired housewife who under no condition can let the house become filthy or the dishes go unwashed. Some captains and battalion commanders do let such conditions obtain....The duty, therefore, of the organization commanders is by example and effort to keep up this sanitation and spirit, being jealous as they should to give the recuperative rest that is necessary for this command.” General Edwards expressed himself in a manner that became the hallmark of his reputation for the remainder of the war and for the decades that followed. His soldiers believed in him and appreciated what he

⁶ Herbert, 95.

⁷ Elsie Janis, *The Big Show, My Six Months with the American Expeditionary Forces* (New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corporation, 1919), 63.

⁸ Wunderlich, 25.

⁹ du Boisrouvray, 341-342 [translated by Monique Duval].

did for them in this nasty environment that the Woëvre and subsequent battle sectors inflicted. Edwards put the burden of responsibility on his junior officers. “Their constant and daily duty should be that of a kind and earnest father of a family in the protection and care of that family, at the same time insisting upon every member of it performing his proper function to do his part for the whole. As I have so often said, all that is necessary for an officer with the soldier is to show him and prove to him that you are absolutely interested in him and that you are trying to be fair, make your demands, and he will forgive you even your errors. I demand this and I demand cleanliness of person, equipment, billet, trench, and cantonment.” In conclusion, Edwards issued his familiar trademark of how he saw his soldiers. “In my orders I have seen fit to call you a lot of stout-hearted lads. That stuff in this division proves that you have become soldiers, and I am just as insistent upon all the other attributes, cleanliness and team-play....Don’t let me ever hear again from a soldier that he has asked his supply sergeant many times for clothes and cannot get them. If the fault is the company commander’s after this talk I will hold him accountable.”¹⁰ Daddy had spoken.

Edwards’ enemies in the service held sway over his image for the remainder of the 20th Century. Brigadier General Craig last comments to General Drum regarding Edwards summed up General Liggett’s apprehension when dealing with the man. “General Edwards was recommended to General Liggett for relief from duty with his division. General Liggett was in accord with the views of those making the recommendation but invariably refused to take action because he considered his position as temporary and he further believed that the action should be taken by higher authority. He also laid great stress on the fact that the 26th Division, almost to a man, was intensely loyal to the Division Commander.”¹¹

Samuel Johnson Woolf, a major American twentieth century portrait artist serving as a special correspondent with the AEF, recalled meeting with General Edwards in the home that he retired to in Dedham, Massachusetts. Woolf observed that it was Edwards’ fatherly solicitude for his “boys” that endeared him to 26th Division veterans. On one visit Woolf recalled Edwards relating his time with Calvin Coolidge while campaigning for governor of Massachusetts. Coolidge recognized Edwards’ popularity in the New England region was a plus for his the Coolidge political campaign. Edwards had a penchant for calling the notoriously reserved politician who eventually became the thirtieth president of the United States, “chatterbox.” At the end of one trip Edwards noticed Coolidge’s wife looking bored. Edwards turned to Coolidge and said “What’s the matter, has the Governor been talking you to death?” Governor Coolidge coolly replied, ‘Well, General, the things I don’t say never get me into trouble.’¹² Brigadier General Sherburne related later in life that General Edwards told him that “when he graduated from West Point he rated 80% of his class as of the finest type of men and only 20% as S.O.B.’s...that after forty-five years of active service he had exactly reversed his percentages.”¹³

¹⁰ C. R. Edwards, “Rest and Sanitization for tired troops coming into the Corps Reserve,” 18th May 1918, Box 26, 26th Division, RG 120, NARA.

¹¹ “Confidential Memorandum,” Drum Papers.

¹² Samuel Johnson Woolf, *Drawn from Life* (New York and London: Whittlesey House, 1932), 42-45; William Allen White, *A Puritan in Babylon, The Story of Calvin Coolidge* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1938), 142.

¹³ Brigadier General John H. Sherburne, *The Rambling Reminiscences of an Old Timer* (Boston: Privately printed. 1961), 39.

Major General Clarence Edwards made a success of a military career applying political science to his actions and attitude. In retrospect, the intrigue that ballooned around the man at this time of service at the front required an in-depth application of military science to the 26th Division he fathered and adored. General Pershing summed up Major General Edwards in a postwar penciled note, a note that reflected Pershing's true feelings without the restraint of political backlash, "A thoroughly conceited man with little ability to base it on. In no sense a loyal subordinate, and hence does not inspire that quality in others. Ambitious, but not willing to obtain advancement by merit. A politician on principle; was so as a cadet. Opposes every order and undertakes to win popularity by assuming to know more than those above him and sides with his subordinates in any attitude they display of being imposed upon. Never should have been given a division. Spoiled one of the best ones we had."¹⁴ Despite Pershing's statement, the soldiers of the 26th Division cherished Edwards for the remainder of his life and the decades that followed. A more accurate assessment came from Major General Harbord. "It was perhaps because Edwards loved his men so well that they loved him; he knew thousands of them personally; commanded them in a very human way; was approachable at all times; was solicitous for their welfare and for their rights. He knew human nature and he knew soldiers."¹⁵

¹⁴ Pershing note in F. Warren Pershing papers, Smythe, 215.

¹⁵ Harbord at Memorial Service for General Edwards on April 5th," *Yankee Doings*, 1931.

This article is excerpted from Terry Finnegan's history: *A Delicate Affair on the Western Front: America Learns How to Fight a Modern War in the Woëvre Trenches*. For other articles and material on World War I, Air Intelligence and Reconnaissance, and Military Aviation, visit the author's website:

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