

Soldier and Statesman*

BRIG RD LAW (RETD)

George Catlett Marshall Jr settled on a military career as a young boy. Due to his scholarly limitations he had to take an indirect route to West Point via the Virginia Military Institute which prepared boys for military careers. He was commissioned in the US Army on 4th January 1902 and first came to the notice of the US Army hierarchy in 1912 during the joint Army and National Guard Manoeuvre which he had the task of planning and conducting. His performance showed him up as a competent staff officer, a reputation which was to repeatedly come in the way of his getting command appointments during his service.

When the War broke out in Europe in 1914 Marshall was concerned about the unpreparedness of the US Army as he could see the inevitability of USA getting involved in it. As a junior officer there was little that he could do about it. After USA joined the Western Allies he went to France as operations officer of a division. Of his service in France two events stand out. General Pershing, Commander of the American Expeditionary Force exploded at his divisional commander, during a visit, about the state of his Division. When every one remained silent Marshall stepped forward and sought permission to say something which was grudgingly given. Marshall, flashing with anger, spoke rapidly and overwhelmed Pershing with a host of facts such as men having to go about with gunny bags tied to their feet due to non-availability of boots and other administrative problems. Pershing was taken aback, but on future visits invariably asked for the 'sharp tempered major'. Their relationship grew; Pershing had found a capable and outspoken staff officer and Marshall his mentor.

Later when the US First Army had to switch across from one sector to another sixty miles away for Foch's offensive, Marshall, then on Pershing's staff, had to plan and coordinate the operation which involved relief in the line by 200,000 French troops, pull out, move and re-deployment of 400,000 US troops which included marching columns, mechanical and animal transport, horse drawn artillery and the entire logistic train of the Army over a very limited and poor road network against a tight time schedule: a staff officers' nightmare where one error could result in an almighty snafu. The flawless completion of the switch over reconfirmed Marshall's standing as a

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staff officer of exceptional ability. Marshall's request for assignment with troops and requests from some of the divisional commanders for Marshall's posting to their divisions as a unit commander were turned down on grounds of his indispensability on the staff.

After the war Marshall served in staff, command and instructional appointments and in 1937 was promoted Brigadier General and given command of a brigade. A year later he was in the War Department on the War Plans Staff as the war clouds were beginning to gather over Europe. Marshall believed that USA must start preparations without delay lest it once again become involved in a war unprepared. In 1938 President Roosevelt sought 500 million dollars for defence and wanted the Air Corps, then a part of the Army, to undergo major expansion, calling for production of 15,000 aircraft per year. New ground weapons were also needed and in Marshall's view Roosevelt's emphasis on the Air Corps was disproportionate and the Army needed to be a balanced force. Marshall was appointed Deputy Chief of Staff and made responsible for the Army's Budget. While the professionals were for a balanced force, others led by the Secretary of the Treasury, and including the powerful Harry Hopkins, wanted 'what the President wanted, because the President wanted it'. After Roosevelt had finished talking at a meeting on the subject he asked those present for their views. While some agreed others had little to say, but Marshall when asked if he agreed replied, "Mr President, I am sorry I don't agree with that at all". Taken aback, Roosevelt hurriedly closed the meeting. After discussion with Marshall Hopkins became a convert to the balanced force concept and later became one of Marshall's most important allies in the War Department. Hopkins urged Marshall to take the case for a balanced force directly to the President even though as Deputy Chief he lacked the authority.

For the Chief of Staff's appointment which was falling vacant in August 1939, amongst the senior officers with at least four years to serve before superannuation Brigadier General Marshall stood fifth in the order of seniority. While some of his seniors lobbied extensively, he did nothing except attending to his official duties. Perhaps this was his greatest asset which led Roosevelt to nominate him as the next Chief of Staff. When he assumed the appointment on 31st August 1939 he jumped from one to four stars.

With German forces massed on the Polish frontier and Japan already at war with China, making its expansionist aims very clear, war was indeed near. In this scenario the strength of the US Army, including the Air Corps, stood at 174,000 officers and men with most units under strength, transport short rendering it difficult to concentrate formations for training, its equipment mostly of World War I or earlier vintage and higher headquarters

existing only on paper. New weapons had yet to be produced and the industry was not geared up for defence production. When the War broke out Marshall, as the Chief of Staff, faced immense problems and set about to tackle them immediately. The problem of equipment was partially solved by the revision of the Neutrality Act permitting cash sales of military hardware to the belligerents and later further eased by Lend Lease which gave a further boost to the defence industry. Along with the expansion of the Army, organisation, doctrines and training required revision to bring them in line with new concepts of open mobile warfare. Marshall gave this task to the Command and Staff School at Fort Leavenworth. There was a good deal of dead wood in the officer corps and Marshall appointed a committee of senior retired officer headed by the former Chief of Staff to weed out the older and ineffective officers to make room for promotion of more capable younger ones. Even before the Committee got down to work Marshall offered his own resignation to the President.

The Army started to grow and its rate of expansion picked up and reached 300,000 men per month. New mobile infantry divisions and armoured divisions patterned on the German panzer divisions were formed and logistic services and systems created for the new patterned Army. Equipment started flowing in from the industry and the Army started training on the basis of updated doctrines. This alone was a gigantic task considering that a scratch force that existed in 1939 grew into a modern Army of 3.5 million in 1942 and then to 7.5 million in 1944 and finally stood at 9 million at the end of the War, and this Army never felt the lack of logistic support, which in the eyes of other armies was lavish or even luxurious. The moving force behind it was George Marshall. In addition, as Chief of Staff, he played a key role in the shaping of not only American, but even Allied strategy for the conduct of the War and attended every single Anglo-American and Allied summit conference with Roosevelt who leaned heavily upon him for support. Marshall had the global vision to strike the correct balance between demands of the European and Pacific Theatres and within Europe of clearly seeing the advantages of mounting the invasion on the Western coast as against via the Mediterranean to strike at what Churchill called 'the soft underbelly of Europe'. His military standing and diplomatic skill enabled him to get his way with strong minded Allied leaders like Churchill and Stalin.

When time came for the appointment of the Supreme Commander for the invasion of Europe, Roosevelt changed his earlier decision to appoint Marshall and nominated Eisenhower instead after telling Marshall that he felt he could not sleep at night with him out of the country. Marshall's excellence at his job had again come in the way of his getting command in the field.

When Marshall reached the age of superannuation at the end of 1944 a bill was passed exempting him from the normal retirement age. In the same month he was promoted to the five star rank of General of the Army. Eventually, in November 1945 he was permitted to retire, although as a five star general he would remain a serving officer all his life.

The Marshalls had barely reached their home in Virginia when there was a call from President Truman asking him to go to China as the US Ambassador. He was given the task of bringing about an end to the civil war going on between Mao's Communists and Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang forces. Although he earned the respect of both sides as an impartial mediator he was unable to bring about an understanding between the two. This was one mission in which he had failed.

While he was still in China Truman had decided to appoint Marshall the Secretary of State. When he was sounded for his reaction his reply was that he would take any job to get out of his present one! Being a serving officer he could not accept a political office and for this purpose he had to be placed on the inactive list before being sworn-in in January 1947. Having contributed so much to winning the War Marshall's primary concern now was to win the peace. The economy of Europe lay shattered, its industries destroyed and food production insufficient to feed the people. The worst hit was Germany. Marshall concluded that the solution lay not in keeping European countries on perpetual American aid but in helping them to recover from the ravages of the War. This would not only reduce the burden on the US Exchequer, but also, in the long term, create markets for American goods. He came up with a seventeen billion dollar programme spread over four years to assist European countries and the occupied zones of West Germany to increase production in agriculture, fuel transportation and machine tools, striving at the same time to hold down inflation. Soviet Union along with its satellite countries opted out. Initially named European Recovery Programme, it was re-christened 'Marshall Plan' by Truman to make it more readily acceptable to the American public due to the respect commanded by Marshall. He is better remembered today for the Marshall Plan than for his work as the US Army Chief of Staff during World War II and his contribution to Allied victory. As tensions between the Western Powers and the Soviet Bloc grew Marshall proposed a Western alliance for collective security which came to be known as the NATO. In January 1949 Marshall retired as the Secretary of State looking forward to enjoying his retirement.

Though quite content with his retirement the old soldier had to once again respond to the President's call after the outbreak of the Korean War to become the Secretary of Defence. This appointment did not come about

easily. The Act which created the Department stipulated that the Secretary should not have served in the Armed Forces for the preceding ten years. Marshall, besides having been the Chief of Staff till 1945, as a five star general was a serving officer. It was necessary to amend the Act which did not go through without opposition from the extreme right led by McCarthy and others who attributed the fall of Chiang Kai-shek's regime to Marshall's pro-Communist leanings. Marshall's time as Secretary of Defence was marked by the rebuilding of the US Armed Forces to face the growing Soviet and Chinese threats, reorganisation of the higher defence set up with the Chiefs of Staff Committee headed by the Chief of Defence Staff, the Korean War and the recall of MacArthur who had begun to overstep his charter. In 1951, Marshall then over seventy and very tired asked the President to relieve him and he finally retired after forty nine years and eight months of service to his country.

In 1953 Marshall was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace, a unique distinction for a soldier.

Austere and aloof of manner, Marshall maintained a dignified reserve. He was always correct and courteous and his commanding presence made others treat him in like manner. Even Roosevelt rarely addressed him as anything other than General. He was punctilious about addressing Eisenhower as Mr President after he was sworn in even though in the Army he had been one of Marshall's boys'. He rarely erupted before his subordinates, but did not hesitate to stand up to his superiors if he found them to be in the wrong. Even though he had held two political offices he personally remained apolitical to the extent that he never voted. With the esteem which the American public held him in he could have easily obtained a nomination and won a presidential election, but he firmly put down all suggestions to that effect. In his heart he probably never approved of Eisenhower having done so. On his retirement as the Chief of Staff Truman described him as the greatest military man that his country had produced.

Though not the official biography, Ed Cray's General of the Army 'provides a very adequate account of the life of George C Marshall Jr, his days as a young boy, his service in the US Army, his contribution to the consolidation of peace, his work in the rebuilding of the US Armed Forces and his interaction with various people in the course of his official and private dealings. The book, above all, gives a clear understanding of his personality and character. It is easy to read and difficult to put down once started.