Ike's Letters to a Friend, 1941 -1958

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Almost a year passed before the two friends again exchanged letters. In the intervening months the plans of Eisenhower and other American leaders for a cross-Channel invasion of France had been delayed as the Allies struck instead in North Africa. Eisenhower was named commander in chief of the combined operation and was promoted to the rank of general, receiving his fourth star in February 1943. By April, and in spite of a host of military and political complications, the campaign was nearing its successful completion.

7 April 1943

Dear Swede:

You cannot imagine how much good your letter did me. It arrived two days ago and already I have read it three times. I have received lots of pro forma congratulations, but no other letter has seemed to me to be so genuine in its expression of good will and in its appreciation of the fact that all the hardest tests are yet to come.

Nothing that I can say can possibly ease your disappointment in being excluded from the more active phases of this war effort. However, as the responsibilities thrust upon me have become wider and heavier, I have come to appreciate more and more
clearly how true it is that nations, not armies and navies, make war. Everybody has a job. Yours happens to be in a niche that does not completely satisfy all the training you have received, the experience you have gained, and the thought you have expended in the naval profession. But I am almost fanatic in my belief that only as we pull together, each of us in the job given him, are we going to defend and sustain the priceless things for which we are fighting. It seems to me that in no other war in history has the issue been so distinctly drawn between the forces of arbitrary oppression on the one side and, on the other, those conceptions of individual liberty, freedom and dignity, under which we have been raised in our great Democracy.

I do not mean to sound like a demagogue nor a politician. In fact, once this war is won, I hope never again to hear the word "politics." But I do have the feeling of a crusader in this war and every time I write a letter or open my mouth, I preach the doctrine that I have so inadequately expressed above.

Needless to say, it would be a great pleasure to have you by my side. Admiral [Ernest J.] King gave me a Naval Reserve officer (Lt. Comdr. [Harry C.] Butcher) for a Naval Aide. He lives with me and is my constant companion. All other naval officers in this command are incorporated in the navy set-up, the Americans under Vice Admiral [H. Kent] Hewitt, who reports in turn to Admiral of the Fleet [Sir Andrew Browne] Cunningham (one of the finest men I have had the privilege of meeting).

Thanks again for your fine letter. I hope that when this war is over, you and I can get together to review events and relate to each other our experiences.

With cordial regard,

As ever,

After the victory in North Africa, Eisenhower turned his attention to Italy, where Allied forces under his command landed first in Sicily and then, in September 1943, on the toe of the boot itself. By early October the Allies had taken Naples; but the advance then stalled as the Germans committed some twenty-five
divisions to the defense of Italy while the Allies, at the same time, began diverting troops and supplies for a long-delayed cross-Channel invasion of France.

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20 October 1943

Dear Swede:

Your letters are not only entertaining; they are fine for my ego. Naturally, I like to get them.

I can well understand your disappointment in being turned down again by the medics. However, I am happy to see that you have taken the decision as philosophically as is possible and are not letting it get you down. In a way, your case is like that of [my brother] Milton's. He thoroughly detested his final job in Washington but felt that it was most essential to the war effort and felt rather guilty in considering the acceptance of the presidency of Kansas State. He cabled me on the matter and I sent him a long message, setting forth my own ideas in considerable detail. Briefly, they are that no man in the world today has a more responsible job than those who are influencing the thinking of the younger generation, yet in school. The teaching of the obligations as well as the privileges of American citizenship, the virtue of old-fashioned patriotism, the need for a clean, honest approach to intricate problems and the necessity for earnest devotion to duty, are things that must be thoroughly inculcated in the rising generation, if we are to survive as a sturdy nation.

You may say that such a thought provides only cold comfort to a man who is trained for emergency action and, when the emergency arises, is confined to something that is not to his personal liking. I really think you would be wrong in feeling that way. I mingle all the time with men of our armies, men of considerable intelligence. It is amazing to find out how few have any concept of obligation to the country that has given them privileges which they assume to be a God-given right and theirs without cost. It is amazing also to hear ideas expressed which indicate a belief in the invincibility of America, whether or not she
really girds up her loins to wage a bitter fight. Therefore, the soldier often sees no reason why he should be undergoing hardship and discomfort, and one of our major problems is to attempt education along these lines at the same time that the man is called upon to enter a fight where strong convictions along such lines would be the surest way of making him invincible on the battlefield.

This is clumsily and possibly even incoherently stated but I am sure you will detect my absolute sincerity.

I am writing to my son John today. Whether or not he will get down toward Annapolis and, if he should, whether or not he could compete, even momentarily, with the snappy blue uniforms of the Midshipmen, I still feel that I owe it to him to pass on your information as to your older daughter. At least they have two things in common—they are both blondes and their fathers are both from Abilene, Kansas.

My very best to you and your family and please write to me when you get a chance.

Cordially,

P.S. In late years I have seen Bob Baughey [Robert M. Baughey, a public-relations officer in the War Department] occasionally and, at one time, I asked him to go along with my command. At that time he had another job in view and so I have lost track of him. However, I will send his name on to the proper Staff Section to determine whether I might get him over here for assignment.