

Reflections of the Class of 1956

“I Like Ike”

By Foster Ulrich

Our time goes back when America had a man as president whom the country trusted as no President since. It was our freshmen year 1952. Dwight Eisenhower was his party's nominee for the Presidency of the United States. Dwight David Eisenhower was the very model of political integrity and something of a national father figure. As a five star general, he commanded the allied forces in Europe and led us to victory in World War II. As president, he brought an end in 1953 to the unpopular Korean War; a number of our classmates in 1956 were veterans of the Korean War and approximately 65% of the student body at the time (1952-54) was enrolled in ROTC, which afforded a deferment from the draft. Eisenhower had perhaps the best campaign slogan of any politician: “I like Ike”. During the years 1956, 1957 and 1958 there were uprisings in the Middle East (what goes around comes around) prompted by Gamal Abdul Nasser's taking over the Suez Canal and exhorting the overthrow of pro-western Middle Eastern governments. Winds of War fanned by insurgent Arab nationalism swept the Middle East. At the request of Lebanon's president Camille Chamoun, Eisenhower sent 6,000 Marines into Lebanon in July 1958. News accounts record the following: “The size of this undertaking was nowhere near as large as “Desert Storm”, but the stakes were considerably higher. Topping the risks was a military confrontation with the Soviet Union, whose air and armored forces were also converging on that embattled region; the unimaginable threat of global nuclear war seemed imminent. As the situation worsened, nearly 100 U.S., British and French war ships assembled in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, prepared to support the Marines in a quick strike operation directed at Lebanon. This combined naval force, the likes of which had not been seen since WWII, included at least four aircraft carriers and a French heavy cruiser. British Marine commandos stood by on the island of Cyprus, ready to assist the 6,000 Marines; the U.S. Army's 187th Airborne Brigade was flown to Turkey, near the Syrian Border; and plane loads of British paratroopers were airlifted to Amman, Jordan. Bombers of the U.S. Air Forces Strategic Air Command were placed on emergency alert as were all U.S. Navy ships. President Eisenhower's directive to his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles was: “Foster, we're going to send in the Marines and we're going to send in everything we've got, and this thing will be over in forty-eight hours”. This world event affected all of us who were on active duty at the time and all of our citizens everywhere. With the passage of an Arab sponsored resolution by the U.N. General Assembly, the final departure of American Forces occurred in October 1958. And now the rest of the story.

General Eisenhower and Governor Scranton were the speakers at F&M's Commencement in 1963. Earlier in the day the former President came to Lancaster from Gettysburg by helicopter landing in the open area near the Baseball field well north of Marshall-Buchanan Hall. Despite the rainy day there was a big crowd on hand to see and greet the former president. The updraft from the chopper's rotating blades turned many umbrellas inside out. With the rain continuing throughout the day, President Eisenhower would be driven by car on the return trip to Gettysburg. A local car dealer provided a new black Lincoln. Bruce Westerdahl, Director of Admissions and a member of the Class of 1956, who grew up in Gettysburg and knew how to get there was selected as the driver. As a member of Bruce's admissions staff, I was invited to go along. I sat in the back with BGEN Robert Schulz, Eisenhower's longtime aide. Eisenhower sat

up front. I hardly said a word but Bruce and the former president carried on a conversation during the entire trip like two old friends. As they say, Ike was easy to be with, so was Bruce. When we arrived at the Eisenhower Farm in Gettysburg, the General invited us in for a drink. My good friend Bruce said and I quote: "Mr. President, you had a long day and we don't want to impose any longer" and declined the invitation. No drink, no autograph, no Mamie, no visit to the Farmhouse, only great memories of the former President of the United States, our Alma Mater, dear old F&M, and my good friend and classmate, Bruce Westerdahl, who admits it was "the dumbest thing he ever did".



My Experience with a Former President by Bruce Westerdahl

Before I report on an event that occurred here at Franklin and Marshall in 1963, let me answer a question some of you may be asking. That is, "Who is this guy?" I don't remember him from any of our classes or social functions.

The fact is, I originally entered F & M in the fall of 1949, but I left at the end of my junior year. After three years in the Marine Corps, I returned to join you as a member of the Class of 1956. A year later Dick Showers asked me to join his admissions staff, and a few years later I was appointed Director of Admissions.

You may also wonder why I would speak about an event that occurred here in 1963. That is because of my experience that day with the man considered by historians to be one of the top ten

greatest generals and one of the top ten greatest presidents of our country. That man was Dwight David Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in Europe in World War II and President of the United States from 1953 to 1961.

The event was our 176th Commencement, and the date was Sunday, June 2, 1963. Keith Spalding, the College President at the time, invited Ike to receive an honorary degree at our commencement exercises that year, and he accepted. For reasons Dr. Spalding never explained, I was asked to chauffeur Ike and his aide to the various activities designed to welcome him and honor him that day.

To guarantee the former Five Star General and President rode in style that day, the local Lincoln dealer was happy to provide the biggest and newest Lincoln on his lot. On Sunday morning, Ike arrived on campus by helicopter from his farm in Gettysburg, and I was privileged to transport him to various sites on campus. When it was time to leave, bad weather would not permit him to return the same way he came, so I was asked to drive Ike back to Gettysburg that afternoon.

That big Lincoln gave assurance that Ike and his aide would be comfortable, and because I was a graduate of Gettysburg High School, Dr. Spalding was certain I wouldn't lose my passenger on some side street in York.

I had no reservations about the trip. I thought Ike would sit in the back with his aide as they had done throughout the day, so I asked Fuz Ulrich, who had joined our admissions staff by this time, to keep me company on the trip.

When Ike got in the car in the front seat with me, I panicked. I had little or no interest in politics, I was not a student of WWII, and I certainly did not travel in the same circles as former generals and presidents. What would we talk about for the hour and a half trip from the F & M campus to Ike's farm in Gettysburg?

Well, if any of you have read about General Eisenhower in World War II, you know he was beloved by the lowliest grunt in the service. His troops admired, respected and loved him because he treated them like the Band of Brothers they were.

Before we left the Lancaster city limits, one of the most famous men of the Twentieth Century made me feel like we had known each other for years.

As I recall, the conversation never lagged. We talked about football, the Baltimore Colts, fast food restaurants, country music, White Faced Hereford cattle, places to shop in Gettysburg, and thanks to Fred Klein, I was able to converse with my important passenger about the Battle of Gettysburg and the Civil War. In the hour and a half trip to Gettysburg, I can't recall a single lull in the conversation. The fact is, the time passed so quickly, before I knew it, we were parked in President Eisenhower's farmhouse driveway.

In my lifetime, I did some stupid things, but what I did on June 2, 1963 when we pulled up to Ike's farm in Gettysburg, tops the list. For when we got there, Ike invited Fuz and me to follow him into his home for a drink, an invitation I politely declined because of his long and busy day.

In other words, I turned down the opportunity to sip a Manhattan with one of the most famous men in American History, my new friend, Ike. I call it the dumbest thing I ever did, and Fuz will never let me forget it.

In my career I met many people who, by reason of their degrees, experience or station in life, *thought* they were important. Dwight David Eisenhower accepted his prominence without pretension, vanity or affectation. My brief experience with him was an honor and a privilege I'll never forget.

Recently, when I look back on that day, I like to think that, perhaps, General Eisenhower considered this lowly Marine Buck Sergeant another one of his Band of Brothers.