

Matthew Bunker Ridgway (1895 – 1993)

by **David Ting**



INTRODUCTION

Matthew Bunker Ridgway, also known as Matthew Ridgway was a four-star general from the United States (US) Army, who served from 1917 to 1955. He is most famously known for his contributions during the Korean War (1950-1953), specifically taking over from General Douglas MacArthur after the latter was relieved of duty by President Harry Truman.¹

EARLY LIFE & CAREER

Matthew Ridgway was born on 3rd March, 1895, at Fort Monroe, Virginia, the son of Thomas Ridgway and Ruth Starbuck Bunker. His father was an artillery colonel who also graduated from West Point in 1883.² In addition, his father served in China and during the time of the Boxer Rebellion in 1901. His mother was a concert-class pianist and collector of works of art.³

Ridgway graduated from English High School in Boston,

Massachusetts in 1912. Being an 'army brat' and wanting to please his father, Ridgway applied to the United States Military Academy (USMA).⁴ However, his first attempt was not successful since he failed mathematics. Nevertheless, after much hard work he was admitted in his second application to West Point.⁵

During his time at West Point, Ridgway was the undergraduate manager of the football team. He was classmates with Mark Clark, another revered four-star general from the US Army who served during World War I (WWI), World War II (WWII) and the Korean War.⁶ Ridgway's class graduated early in 1917 due to the US engagement in WWI. Ridgway was commissioned as an Infantry officer and rose to Lieutenant in anticipation of joining the war. However, he was posted to Eagle Pass, Texas, where he commanded an Infantry company.

INTERWAR PERIOD

After the war, when General Douglas MacArthur was Superintendent of West Point, he was appointed as an Instructor for Spanish and also an athletic manager.⁷ Between 1924 and 1925, Ridgway attended the Company Officers course at Infantry School in Fort Benning, Georgia. Upon graduation, Ridgway was posted to Tientsin, China, where he commanded a company in the 15th Infantry Regiment.⁸

Notably, Ridgway had hoped to be part of the Army's pentathlon team for the 1928 Olympic Summer Games in Amsterdam. But in an interview later, he recalled that "I could not reject so bright an opportunity to prepare myself for any military-diplomatic role that the future might offer."⁹ In 1927, persuaded by Major General Frank McCoy, Ridgway was stationed in Nicaragua, where he supervised the 1927 parliamentary election.¹⁰

Ridgway then went on to graduate from the Army Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas in 1935 and the Army War College at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania in 1937.

WORLD WAR II

When the US became involved in WWII, then-Colonel Ridgway was sent to the War Plans Division

of the War Department. In January 1942, Ridgway was promoted to Brigadier General and was the commander of the then-82nd Infantry Division. As commander, Ridgway oversaw the training of the unit in North Africa to prepare for the campaign to invade Sicily. In July, the unit arrived in Sicily and soon after on 23rd July, 1943, Prime Minister Benito Mussolini was arrested.¹¹ Operation Husky, also known as the invasion of Sicily, was a success as the Italian fascist regime fell into the hands of the Allies.

Towards the end of the war, the now veteran 82nd Airborne Division was deployed to the Elsenborn Ridge in Germany to engage in the Battle of the Bulge. They were assigned to take Cheneux where they would force the Waffen SS Division Leibstandarte's Kampfgruppe Peiper into retreat. However, on 24th December, 1944, with a strength of 8,520 men, the 82nd Airborne Division were faced off with a much larger force of 43,000 men. Owing to this circumstance, the division had to withdraw its forces for the first time in its combat history.¹²

The 82nd Airborne Division conducted a counterattack on 3rd January, 1945, and defeated

the 62nd Volksgrenadier Division and the 9th SS Panzer Division. However, the counterattack was not without its cost. In the aftermath of the attack, Ridgway lost a Battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Joerg, and much of his men were wounded, killed or suffered frostbite.

In March 1945, with the British 6th Airborne Division and the US 17th Airborne Division now under his command, newly promoted Major General Ridgway initiated Operation Varsity and invaded Germany. Subsequently in June 1945, Ridgway was promoted to Lieutenant General and went on to command US troops in Luzon, the Mediterranean and even the Caribbean.

KOREAN WAR

On 22nd December, 1950, Lieutenant General Matthew Ridgway was enjoying a cocktail with his friend when the phone rang. He was informed that General Walton Walker, the commander of the Eighth Army, had died in a jeep accident.¹³ Ridgway was ordered immediately to fly to Korea and take over General Walker's post. Adding to the confusion, Ridgway was not given any official warning that he was next in line to command the Eighth Army.

At this point of time, the Korean War had signified the demise of the American Army. Just five years prior, in 1945, the US were celebrating victory over the Axis Powers. Now, the opposite become reality with Communist Forces chasing American Troops, the vision of a Communist Asia was on the verge of reality and former friends were now formidable adversaries. In a matter of five years, things had changed for America.

For General Ridgway, the challenge was not only unifying the Eight Army but also fixing the strained relations between Washington and the Far East Command.¹⁴ When Ridgway arrived in Korea, he visited the Eight Army which he was to command. To his horror, he discovered that the entire Army was in turmoil. The soldiers lacked proper winter clothing, food was in short supply and the officers would rather flee from the battle.¹⁵ In the days to come, Ridgway learned of rumours that American troops were cheering when they retreated south of the 38th Parallel. Supplies of weapons, ammunition and food were abandoned in the North. This hindered the army from advancing into North Korean territory while expanding the supplies of the communist army.

From his observations, Ridgway concluded that the organisation was lacking competent leaders. This led to a widespread array of problems including a divided army and poorly executed missions, just to name a few. To combat this problem, he restored the soldiers' morale by circulating manifestos that outlined why there were fighting their former allies after the defeat of their once-common enemies and replaced incompetent leaders.¹⁶ Morale immediately went up.

By March, with a revitalised American and South Korean Army, Ridgway not only retook Seoul but managed to get United Nations (UN) forces across the 38th Parallel. A month later, when General Douglas MacArthur was relieved of command by President Harry Truman, Ridgway was finally promoted to General and commander of all UN forces in Korea. General Ridgway would oversee the stalemate of the war until he went to his next post in Europe.

SUPREME ALLIED COMMANDER

In May 1952, General Ridgway took over from General Eisenhower as Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR). Ridgway was

the second general to hold this post.¹⁷ The SACEUR is responsible for Allied Command Operations (ACO) and reports to the Military Committee for military exercises that the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) carries out. In addition, the SACEUR is the senior military spokesman for ACO. SACEUR goes for official visits to NATO countries where military operations and countries where NATO is forming alliances with.¹⁸

During his time as SACEUR, Ridgway developed an effective command structure and improved training and uniformity between the militaries. Furthermore, he supervised an augmentation of the forces. Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff, General Omar Bradley commented to President Truman that "Ridgway had brought NATO to its realistic phase and a generally encouraging picture of how the heterogeneous defence force is being gradually shaped."¹⁹

CHIEF OF STAFF, US ARMY

After General Ridgway stepped down from his post as SACEUR in July 1953, he assumed the post of Chief of Staff of the US Army (CSA) from General J. Lawton Collins. This would be his last post before he retired from the military.

Being the most senior officer in the US Army, the CSA directs tasks and ensures co-ordination between service personnel and special staff officers.²⁰ In addition, the CSA supervises the Army Staff, serves as a member of the Joint Chief of Staff (JCS) and provides military advice to the Secretary of Defence, President and Congress.²¹

During his time as CSA, under the discretion of President Eisenhower, Ridgway was tasked to assess US Military movement in Vietnam in relation to the French. Thus, Ridgway provided Eisenhower with a comprehensive plan that details the crucial actions that will bring success to the US Military. However, President Truman was not keen on the idea. This was because Ridgway's belief in airpower and nuclear bombs did not reduce the size of the need for mobile ground forces to seize land and control communities.²² Furthermore, Eisenhower's proposal to reduce the size of the army troubled Ridgway because this meant that it would be ill-equipped to counteract the growing force of the Soviet Union.

On the other hand, President Eisenhower approved a waiver that specified that the mandatory

military retirement age was 60. This was so that Ridgway could complete his term as CSA. Disagreements between the senior officers and the administration prevented Ridgway from obtaining a second term. He retired from the army on 30th June, 1955, and was succeeded by General Maxwell D. Taylor.

POST-MILITARY LIFE

After his retirement from the military, Ridgway continued to be very active as a speaker, author and leader. He published several books including his war memoirs, titled 'Soldier' and 'The Korean War: How We Met the Challenge'. These books were published in 1956 and 1957 respectively.²³ In addition, Ridgway gave many speeches and participated in various panels, discussions and group.

He also advocated the use of chemical and radiological weapons, arguing that they could protect national interests better than the weapons that the military were currently using.²⁴

LEGACY

Ridgway passed away in Fox Chapel, Pennsylvania on 26 July, 1993, at the age of 98 from a heart attack. He is buried at Arlington National Cemetery. In his eulogy,

Colin Powell said, "No soldier ever performed his duty better than this man. No soldier ever upheld his honour better than this man. No soldier ever loved his country more than this man did. Every American soldier owes a debt to this great man."²⁵

Truly, Powell's statement summarises Ridgway's life as a soldier. He is a remarkable character who held the nation's honour in its highest standard during times of crisis. Certainly, Matthew Ridgway has influenced many young soldiers to achieve their best in the face of adversity.

ENDNOTES

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