

# Hometown Support in the Midst of War

## Dwight Eisenhower's Wartime Correspondence With Abilene Friends

*by Kerry E. Irish*

**D**wight D. Eisenhower was one of the most important American leaders of the twentieth century. Despite his humble Kansas origins, Eisenhower became the Supreme Allied Commander in western Europe during World War II and served two terms as president of the United States from 1953 to 1961. Through it all Eisenhower's respect and affection for Abilene, Kansas, and his friends there endured; both are reflected in his wartime correspondence with several Abilene friends. This correspondence could have been a bother to a man with Eisenhower's responsibilities, but such was not the case. A prodigious letter writer before, during, and after the war, Eisenhower seems to have genuinely welcomed this exchange with hometown friends. Perhaps these letters supplied one form of an emotional release and a reminder that some parts of the world were not destroyed by war. Moreover, the general's Abilene friends assured him of their support and provided him with comforting news as to his mother's health and well being. Indeed, this correspondence was a comfort not a nuisance. In the dark and uncertain days of the war, Eisenhower enjoyed hearing from home and reading about its people and events.

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*General Dwight D. Eisenhower on the European battlefield.*

*Eisenhower's hometown of Abilene, 1940s, looking west on Third Street. Joner Callahan's, where Ike's friends often gathered, is in the lower left of the photo.*



As we shall see, the letters themselves support this thesis. But it also is sustained by the testimony of one of the general's most trusted advisers—then Lieutenant Commander Harry Butcher, who had been a close friend of Ike's for many years. In 1942, on the eve of taking up his responsibilities in London as European Theater Commander, Eisenhower asked Admiral Ernest King that Butcher be assigned him as a "naval aid." King granted the favor, and Butcher would be Ike's near constant companion over the next three years. If anyone were in a position to know how Ike regarded news and letters from home, Butcher was. In a letter to the general's brother Milton Eisenhower, Butcher wrote: "nothing pleases him [Ike] more than clippings of stories or letters about his mother, brothers, family, and old friends."<sup>1</sup>

1. Harry Butcher to Milton Eisenhower, September 1, 1942, box 14, file 1942, Milton S. Eisenhower Papers, 1938–1973, Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kans.; Stephen Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier, General of the Army, President-Elect, 1890–1952* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 153–54.

While the letters discussed herein and the friendships they represent were important to Eisenhower, and the part of his personality that they nurtured was real, Ike's Abilene correspondence reveals only one facet of a complex personality. It is perhaps true that they demonstrate that part of the Eisenhower persona that is more widely known: the friendly, gregarious, open Eisenhower, everyman's friend, the general from a small town who was still, in some ways, small town. These hometown letters should not, however, be construed to support the "myth" that Eisenhower was virtually an accidental general who made it through World War II largely because he was a charming fellow in the right place at the right time. Eisenhower was friendly and charming, but he was also, according to historian Eric Larrabee, "a most unusual man, a veiled man, so seemingly forthright, so ready to volunteer his thoughts, yet in the end so secretive, so protective of his purposes and the hidden processes of an iron logic behind them." Quoting John Roche, Larrabee continued: "Few who watched him carefully indulged the fantasy that he

was a genial, open, barefoot boy from Abilene who just happened to be in the right place when lightning struck."<sup>2</sup>

The question that arises, then, is what "veiled" or real purpose, if any, Eisenhower had for this correspondence? The general was writing to old friends in Abilene, not to generals, presidents, and prime ministers. One of the aspects of this complex man's personality was that he retained a sincere affection for his hometown and its people. Nevertheless, it may be that the letters also were intended to enhance his image in Abilene, to incite hero worship. In June 1943 he wrote to his old girlfriend Gladys Brooks:

Since reading your letter of May 10 I am having great difficulty buttoning my blouse and getting my hat down to its accustomed place on my head. I think that when I get back to the old hometown I will be in a state of mind to merely hop off the Union Pacific, stand in the middle of the street and shout "Here I am." Unless the whole town responds on an instant's notice, I will be sadly deflated.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, there is no denying that Eisenhower's letters made a fine impression in Abilene; and there is ample evidence of his "hero" status among his correspondents. However, this secondary purpose can only be inferred, whereas the other purposes previously outlined are clearly demonstrated in his correspondence.

**O**n February 16, 1942, slightly more than two months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall placed Dwight Eisenhower in charge of the War Plans Division. The newspapers reported this news about Abilene's favorite son on February 20, and Art Hurd, an attorney and former mayor of Abilene, wrote the general that very day. Hurd was several years older than Ike, but the two men had been friends since Eisenhower's youth. For fear that his letter would unnecessarily distract Eisenhower, Hurd wrote: "Please do not feel that the acknowledgment of the receipt of this letter is necessary." He went on to congratulate Ike on his new responsibilities as one of

2. Eric Larrabee, *Commander in Chief: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, His Lieutenants and Their War* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 419; John Roche, "Eisenhower Redux," *New York Times Book Review*, June 28, 1981, 12.

3. Dwight David Eisenhower to Gladys Brooks, June 10, 1943, quotation in Merle Miller, *Ike the Soldier: As They Knew Him* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1987), 503.

those responsible for implementing the Allied strategic plan to win the war. Indeed, Eisenhower played a significant role fleshing-out the "Europe First" strategy. Hurd could not contain his pride and predicted that his friend would be promoted within twelve months. Hurd's hopes for Ike's career were actually conservative. Marshall awarded Eisenhower his second star on March 27, just days before he was named Assistant Chief of Staff in charge of the Operations Division, the reorganized version of the War Plans Division.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to his congratulations, Hurd also had news from home. He had just spoken to Eisenhower's mother, Ida, and learned that his father, David Eisenhower, was still quite ill and "lies down most of the time."<sup>5</sup> On March 10, 1942, David Eisenhower passed away. Dwight was too busy to attend the funeral, but in his diary he wrote:

I have felt terribly. I should like so much to be with my mother these few days. But we're at war. And war is not soft, it has no time to indulge in even the deepest and most sacred emotions. I loved my Dad. I think my Mother the finest person I've ever known. She has been the inspiration for Dad's life a true helpmeet in every sense of the word. I am quitting work now, 7:30 P.M. I haven't the heart to go on.<sup>6</sup>

The next day, the day of the funeral, Ike isolated himself and took thirty minutes to reflect on his father's life. He wrote in his diary all of the reasons he admired his father. The list was long. He finished:

His finest monument is his reputation in Abilene and Dickinson County, Kansas. . . . Because of it, all central Kansas helped me to secure an appointment to West Point in 1911, and thirty years later it did the same for my son John. I am proud he was my father. My only regret is that it was always so difficult to let him know the great depth of my affection for him.<sup>7</sup>

4. Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *The Eisenhower Diaries* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), entry for February 16, 1942; Larrabee, *Commander in Chief*, 48; Geoffrey Perret, *Eisenhower* (New York: Random House, 1999), 156–61; Kent Roberts Greenfield, ed., *Command Decisions* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1987), 33–47; Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, 144.

5. Art Hurd to Dwight Eisenhower, February 20, 1942, box 59, Arthur Hurd file, Names Series, Principal Files, Dwight David Eisenhower, Pre-Presidential Papers, 1916–1952, Eisenhower Library, hereafter cited as Pre-Presidential Papers.

6. Ferrell, *The Eisenhower Diaries*, March 11, 1942.

7. *Ibid.*, March 12, 1942.

Charley Case, another Abilene friend, whose own father was quite ill, expressed his condolences a few days later. In spite of his own worries, Case had taken the time to visit Ida, and Eisenhower responded in appreciation, even though Case had written Ike need not bother. The general's spare moments were indeed rare. The day after Ike wrote Case, Eisenhower wrote to the president asking that General Jonathan Wainwright be given greater latitude in arranging a surrender of his Bataan, Philippine Islands, garrison.<sup>8</sup>

While the war news was alarming in the first half of 1942, Eisenhower reeled from still another personal loss, the death of his brother Roy. Both Art Hurd and Charley Case wrote their condolences; responding to Hurd, Eisenhower wrote, "I do not know how my mother will get along."<sup>9</sup>

Ike had reason to be concerned. Since his father's death Ida Eisenhower's mind had been deteriorating. Roy, who had lived nearest his parents in Junction City (twenty-five miles from Abilene), checked in about once a week to see how they were doing. He also handled the money that Ike—and it seems likely the other brothers—provided for their mother's care. Now he was gone. The family hired Naomi Engle to be a live-in companion for Ida, but Engle was not as conscientious as the brothers would have liked, and she was dismissed and another care-giver hired. Soon, Milton Eisenhower returned to the area as president of Kansas State Agricultural College and was able to provide some personal care. Nevertheless, Ike continued to rely on old friends to keep an eye on his mother.<sup>10</sup>

In June 1942 Eisenhower was named Commanding General U.S. Army European Theater of Operations headquartered in England.<sup>11</sup> Ike's new responsibilities made him a celebrity with the press and numerous articles referred to him as a Texan. This irritated Ike no small amount. He wrote to Charley Case that he had tried to get reporters to recognize that though he had been born in Texas, he had lived twenty years in Abilene, Kansas. The general did not

want his hometown friends to think he had forgotten them. "I want you to remember that I am proud of my own hometown," wrote Eisenhower, "and that I have never claimed any place in the world as my home except Abilene." Ike also asked Charley to give his best to all of his old friends and listed some of them by name.<sup>12</sup>

That same June, Art Hurd wrote with news of Eisenhower's family. Ida was well, and Ike's son John had written Hurd, one of John's "remote" West Point sponsors, to inform him of his record there. Based on that letter Hurd told Ike that although John may have acquired a few too many demerits, he was "a smart boy . . . and no damn sissy."<sup>13</sup> Eisenhower was playfully envious that John had written to Hurd:

I am delighted that John wrote you. In this connection you are an unusually favored person, because I have been in England now for some seven weeks and so far I have gotten exactly one line from the scoundrel! He told Mamie [Dwight's wife] that he has written to me but, if so, he must have addressed it with his usual care in such matters—the kind of care that gets him so damned many demerits.

Eisenhower longed to see his son, and told Hurd "I would certainly pay one devil of a lot if I could have him here by my side right now. He would get more good as a prospective army officer out of one week in this maelstrom than he will in six months where he is."<sup>14</sup> Later in the war, John would join his father in England for a time, but for now letters like Hurd's helped Ike cope with the separation from his family.

Eisenhower's Abilene friends were beyond proud that their favorite son was taking such a prominent position in the war. The town planned and staged an "Ike Day" in celebration of the general's accomplishments. C. M. "Charley" Harger, the elderly owner and editor of the *Abilene Reflector-Chronicle*, wrote Ike in this regard on June 18, 1942. The letter began "My Dear General," but the first sentence read, "I would like to say My dear Dwight but I know it just isn't done." Harger went on to describe the

8. Charley Case to Dwight Eisenhower, April 3, 1942, box 21, Charles A. Case file, Pre-Presidential Papers; Eisenhower to Charley Case, April 7, 1942, *ibid.*; Eisenhower to Franklin D. Roosevelt, April 8, 1942, in *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower: The War Years, vol. 1*, ed. Alfred D. Chandler (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970).

9. Dwight Eisenhower to Art Hurd, July 4, 1942, Pre-Presidential Papers.

10. Dwight Eisenhower to Edgar Eisenhower, May 1, 1942, Family File, Dwight David Eisenhower Published Papers, Eisenhower Library, hereafter cited as Published Papers; "Endacott Narrative," J. Earl Endacott Records, Documentary History Series: Home and Family, box 4, Restricted Material file, Eisenhower Library.

11. Perret, *Eisenhower*, 158–61.

12. Dwight Eisenhower to Charley Case, July 7, 1942, Pre-Presidential Papers.

13. Art Hurd to John Eisenhower, June 11, 1942, Pre-Presidential Papers; Art Hurd to Dwight Eisenhower, June 22, 1942, *ibid.*; Charley Case to Eisenhower, June 22, 1942, *ibid.*; Hurd to Eisenhower, July 14, 1942, *ibid.*

14. Dwight Eisenhower to Art Hurd, August 11, 1942, *ibid.*



*Art Hurd, an attorney and former mayor of Abilene, had been friends with Ike since their childhood. He corresponded with Eisenhower until his sudden death in 1943.*

“Ike Day” festivities. The old editor had escorted Ida to the celebration that evening. They listened to the band play patriotic music, and Ida was introduced to the rousing cheers of the thousand or more people present. Then Harger himself gave the requisite speech.<sup>15</sup> The general wrote back in late August 1942:

After these many years it is a real pleasure—but a great shock—to find you wrong for once. Abilene folks call me “Dwight” and if they ever start high-hatting me by the use of titles, they will begin to make me feel that they no longer want me in the old home town. One of the worst things about high military rank is the loneliness that it imposes on the individual—right this minute nothing would give me more pleasure than to drop into Joner Callahan’s for a morning coke with the gang.

To say that I was not highly flattered by the distinction accorded me in July by Abilene and Manhattan would be a bare-faced lie. However, it is only the plain truth to say that my greatest delight was de-

rived from the fact that the good Kansans, that took part in the celebration, recognized that if any credit is due, it belongs to my Mother. We six boys have been, in the eyes of our parents, the investment that they two made during their lifetime. Any real or fancied success that accrues to any of us belongs to them, and my deepest regret, in connection with this particular occasion, was that my Father could not have lived a few more months so that the two of them, together, would have had that experience.<sup>16</sup>

Harger was a leading Republican and a very influential man, despite his advanced age, and he still contributed to the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Harper’s*. Thus, one might ask, did Ike write to Harger primarily to gain publicity? After all, the man Eisenhower biographer Stephen Ambrose described as an “absolute genius at public relations,” Dwight Eisenhower, was well aware that Harger’s views reached a significant number of people. It is important to remember that another well-documented aspect of Eisenhower’s personality was his propensity to avoid the hero’s spotlight, to

15. Charley Harger to Dwight Eisenhower, June 18, 1942, box 55, Charles M. Harger file, Pre-Presidential Papers.

16. Dwight Eisenhower to Charley Harger, August 27, 1942, *ibid.*



*Charles M. Harger, owner and editor of the Abilene Reflector-Chronicle, was a leading and influential Republican in the area. In 1943, as the war raged in North Africa, Ike conveyed to Charley that writing letters to his hometown friends was almost his "sole relaxation."*

let others on the "team" take the credit, to remain the "hidden-hand," quietly manipulating events behind the scenes.<sup>17</sup> Hence, we cannot infer with confidence that Eisenhower secretly hoped to obtain favorable publicity from Harger through this correspondence.

Art Hurd also congratulated Dwight on "Ike Day." Hurd's letter offered sympathy for the hard job ahead and warned Ike of the political pitfalls of his position. Eisenhower was rather amazed that the old hometown was giving him a "day" and asked Hurd for a newspaper clipping of it. He also agreed with Hurd's estimation of "the perplexities and responsibilities of this job. Right this minute I am going to drop everything and take a drive in the country for about three hours—I'm sick of this office, to which I've been confined for the past weeks with very little respite. Incidentally . . . you are quite correct in saying that I am not a politician, but don't forget—I don't want to be."<sup>18</sup>

17. Dwight Eisenhower to Charles Harger, April 4, 1942, Published Papers; Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, 146; Fred Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), vii–xviii; Larrabee, *Commander in Chief*, 447.

18. Dwight Eisenhower to Art Hurd, August 11, 1942, Pre-Presidential Papers.

Eisenhower had indeed assumed a monumental task and a very political position. He had just received command of TORCH, the allied invasion of North Africa, and was deep in planning for that operation. Among the problems besieging Eisenhower at the time was the scope of the mission: was TORCH to deny the Germans West Africa or was it to seize all of North Africa? "[T]o seize control of the north coast of Africa is," wrote the general, "an entirely different operation from denying the west coast to the enemy."<sup>19</sup>

There were problems at home as well, and the general heard about them from his friends. Abilene's employers found it difficult to fill jobs, and farm hands were scarce. Abilene's Republican Party leaders were split over supporting incumbent senator Arthur Capper who had given the general's son his appointment to West Point. Art Hurd was disgusted by this development and worked hard for Capper. But Hurd still had time to tease Eisenhower about "Ike Day":

19. Dwight Eisenhower to George Marshall, August 1, 1942, Cable File, Published Papers; Dwight Eisenhower to George Marshall, August 2, 1942, *ibid.*; Eisenhower to Marshall, August 4, 1942, *ibid.*; Larrabee, *Commander in Chief*, 133–41, 146–48; Greenfield, *Command Decisions*, 173–88, 271–78.

I was rather amused to note that your last letter was censored just like a letter written by any buck private. The town is plastered with your picture in colors. In order to keep your head at a normal size, I am going to tell you that in my opinion, it is one of the worst pictures you have ever had taken. The mouth looks like Joe E. Brown's and the rest of the face looks like somebody else whom I do not know. The uniform with the three service stripes and the three stars is fine.

Then Hurd related what Ike perhaps most wanted to hear: "I think that your mother must be very well, because she has been attending, as the guest of honor, meetings held to talk about you—country boy makes good in the city."<sup>20</sup> The general was proud of the "country boy" label and often referred to himself as such, even to aristocratic British officers. Ike enjoyed Art's letter and responded with self-deprecatory humor: "Your fine letter of August 18th arrived just a month later, and I had a fine time reading it. I will apologize for the appearance of this picture poster you tell me about as floating around Abilene. The artist may have done a bum job but, after all, he didn't have a hell of a lot to start working on." Ike then suggested to Art that he could let it be known that the Eisenhower family appreciated Senator Capper's efforts. Ike hoped that he might thus discreetly help the senator in the general election.<sup>21</sup>

**O**n November 8, 1942, American and British forces landed in North Africa, launching the effort to secure the Mediterranean region for the Allies. As commander of this operation Eisenhower received considerable publicity, and the people of Abilene were proud. Frances Curry, a childhood friend, wrote of her appreciation for what he had become and was doing. She had taken the time to visit Ida:

I tell you, as I told her, that when I hear your name over the radio, see it in the newspaper, or hear and see you in the newsreels, I could not possibly have a warmer glow around my heart if it were of my own brother. But then, that's what you always were—a big brother protecting the little girls from the guns of your

own small brothers when they staged their wild west shootin' shows out in the old stable loft—and now you're doing the same.<sup>22</sup>

Although Ike was probably a little uncomfortable reading about his exalted status, he read the letter several times and was particularly thankful that Frances had written extensively about her visit with Ida. Indeed, Ike's response to Frances is perhaps his best expression of his feelings about his Abilene friends:

Your nice letter forwarded by Mamie arrived on New Year's Day and was truly a bright spot. It was very thoughtful of you to call on Mother and I am most grateful. I read and reread your account of the visit with her and I am sure that she likewise enjoyed it. A recent letter from Art Hurd also gave me an account of her health and cheery outlook, so you can well imagine that 1943 has begun auspiciously for me.

All our friends in Abilene have been so kind and considerate that I shall always be in their debt. It is difficult to realize how much we depend on friends until we are miles away from all the ties that bind so closely.<sup>23</sup>

The North African campaign continued into 1943. The fighting had been more difficult and prolonged than anyone expected. As these events unfolded Americans studied newspapers and crowded into theaters to watch newsreels. Art Hurd wrote to his favorite general after Eisenhower's forces withstood a furious German counterattack in early December: "We are, of course, praying for you and your men." Then, in an effort to lighten the mood he told Ike how the town itself had been invaded—by reporters. One of them had interviewed Art and later described him in an article as a "spry little man with sharp eyes sitting in a large swivel chair." Hurd also related how the *Wichita Beacon* had given the whole town a laugh when it described Harger, aged seventy-nine, Joner Callahan (fifty-seven), Bill Sterl (sixty-seven), and Hurd (sixty-four) as "classmates of Eisenhower" (fifty-two). Harger in particular "must have been very dumb to have been in school with you." Eisen-

20. Art Hurd to Dwight Eisenhower, August 18, 1942, Pre-Presidential Papers.

21. Dwight Eisenhower to Art Hurd, September 20, 1942, Published Papers; Eisenhower to Charley Harger, December 26, 1943, Pre-Presidential Papers.

22. Frances Curry to Dwight Eisenhower, late 1942, box 25, Frances Curry file, Pre-Presidential Papers.

23. Dwight Eisenhower to Frances Curry, January 2, 1943, *ibid.*



hower replied to Art, "Your letter of January 2 arrived just at the psychological moment to make me forget a lot of headaches that have been bothering me all day."<sup>24</sup>

At this time Eisenhower was in the midst of the controversy over the "Darlan deal." Admiral Jean Darlan was commander in chief of the armed forces of Vichy France. The Allies had hoped that Vichy would not oppose the landings, but unfortunately it did. However, Darlan offered to surrender his forces if Eisenhower would make him governor general of French North Africa. Eisenhower faced a dilemma: the admiral was an odious Nazi collaborator and untrustworthy as well. But as Ambrose wrote, Ike "hated wasting bullets on Frenchmen that had been made to kill Germans." He made the deal in order to secure his rear areas and advance toward the German army in Tunisia. A volcano of criticism erupted over the accommodation with Darlan. It seemed to many in the press, and to British leaders, that a war against tyranny could not be wholly successful if deals were made with its lieutenants. Ike was even accused of being sympathetic to fascism.<sup>25</sup>

This certainly was not the case, but the Darlan decision nearly cost Ike his job. Fortunately, President Roosevelt and General Marshall stood behind Eisenhower; Marshall in particular defended Ike in the press.<sup>26</sup>

In the midst of the Darlan mess, Eisenhower wondered if he had any friends left, even in Abilene; then he thanked Art and his wife, Maud, that he could count on them. Eisenhower need not have worried about how his decision had played in Abilene. Hurd later wrote to him, "If I wanted to commit suicide, I would drop some derogatory remark about you in Callahan's some morning and that would be the finish. If you have any critics anywhere you may be sure that you have none in Abilene."<sup>27</sup>

Having weathered the Darlan storm, Eisenhower and his hometown friends were due for some good news. On February 10, 1943, Dwight Eisenhower was promoted to

full general. Abilene glowed in reflected glory. "Congratulations again!" wrote Art Hurd. "When I stopped in at Joner's [Callahan's] for my morning Coca-Cola the gang was taking up the change to send you a cablegram which you will probably receive tomorrow. Of course the town is delighted with your promotion. Personally, I feel that you will be called upon to pay for it many times over. I am too excited to think of any news at this moment."<sup>28</sup> Joner Callahan was probably Eisenhower's unofficial Abilene publicist as he posted news articles, letters, and cablegrams, anything at all that dealt with the general, in his establishment. Ike "deeply appreciated" Hurd's letter. "I would love to have been in the back room to have secretly seen and heard the proceedings," wrote Eisenhower.<sup>29</sup>

In January 1943, as war rumbled on in North Africa, Charley Harger wrote to the general: "It was mighty nice to send me that New Year's telegram and also send the schoolchildren that lovely letter. How can you find time for such courtesies?" At the bottom of Harger's letter Ike wrote a note to his aid Harold Butcher who helped the general with his correspondence: "Butch, this fine old gentleman (80 at least) helped me get into W. P. [West Point]." Eisenhower's answer of Harger's letter reveals much concerning the importance of his wartime correspondence:

Your letter of January 5th arrived yesterday. I was delighted to read it. . . .

It is an odd thing—your asking me how I find time to write letters. It is almost my sole relaxation. *Moreover, there is nothing from which I get more real enjoyment than hearing from old friends. I like to keep in touch with them. The feeling that they are rooting for me and for my soldiers is too precious to lose . . .* [author's italics].

When you have an opportunity to see her [Ida] again please add your word to vouch for the fact that I am all right.

Since your letter was written I have been given a fourth star. In the days when you were helping me get into West Point, little did you realize that you were helping create a general. Personally, I am amazed.<sup>30</sup>

24. Art Hurd to Dwight Eisenhower, December 7, 1942, Pre-Presidential Papers; Eisenhower to Hurd, January 29, 1943, *ibid*.

25. Stephen Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President* (New York: Touchstone, 1990), 83. Charles B. MacDonald, *The Mighty Endeavor: American Forces in the Europe Theater in World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 96–103. Perret, *Eisenhower*, 181–82.

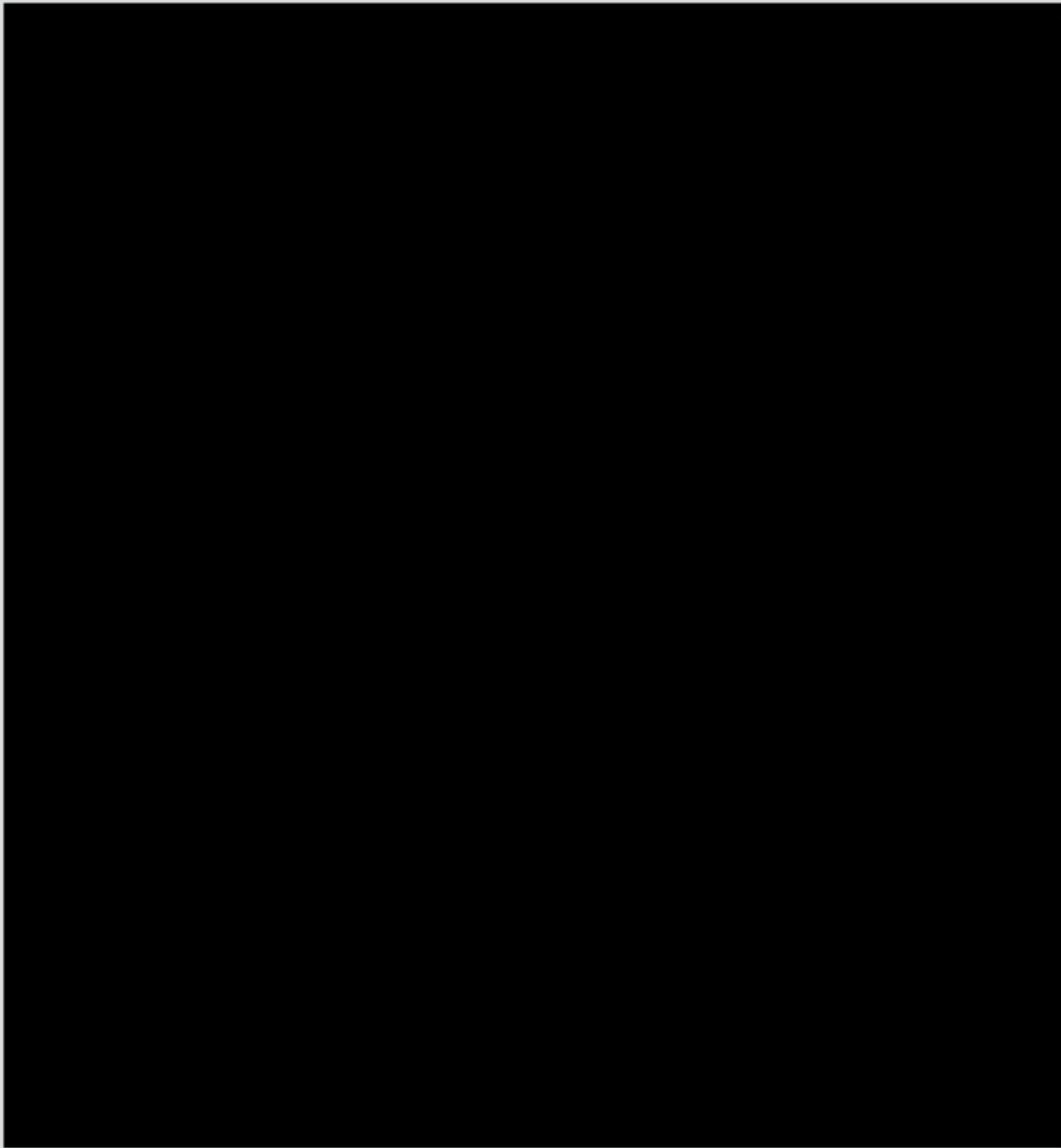
26. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President*, 86; Larrabee, *Commander in Chief*, 424–28.

27. Dwight Eisenhower to Art Hurd, January 29, 1943, Pre-Presidential Papers; Hurd to Eisenhower, April 9, 1943, *ibid*.

28. Art Hurd to Dwight Eisenhower, February 12, 1943, Pre-Presidential Papers; Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President*, 89–91.

29. Dwight Eisenhower to Art Hurd, February 28, 1943, Pre-Presidential Papers.

30. Dwight Eisenhower to Charley Harger, March 5, 1943, *ibid*.; Harger to Eisenhower, January 5, 1943, *ibid*.



*The controversial "Darlan deal" almost cost Ike his job. In this 1942 photo General Eisenhower makes his point to Vichy France's turncoat admiral Jean François Darlan.*

Eisenhower's role in the North African campaign made him famous throughout much of the world and an even greater hero in Abilene. The town's kids all wanted an "Ike" signature. "When and if you ever have time to write me again please sign about a dozen 'Ikes' at the bottom of your letter," wrote Art Hurd. "I think that all of the kids in the country are after your autograph and it seems that they would rather have the Ike than a full Dwight D. Eisenhower. I have given all of your signatures away and have calls for many more. Isn't it great to be great?" Ike was mildly embarrassed. Unaccustomed to notoriety, he replied, "it seems to me a bit silly to be scrawling 'Ike' all over a page, but if taking a couple minutes off to do it will give a bit of pleasure to the kids of Abilene, I can surely find that much time." He had his secretary type a full page of his name, rank, and title then he scribbled "Ike" next to each one and sent the sheet to Hurd.<sup>31</sup>

31. Art Hurd to Dwight Eisenhower, February 16, 1943, *ibid.*; Eisenhower to Hurd, March 23, 1943, *ibid.*

About the same time Eisenhower was scribbling "Ike" on typing paper he learned that Charley Case had suffered a terrible double blow: his wife, Georgia, and his father had passed away. Having recently lost his own father and a brother, Ike understood grief. He wrote:

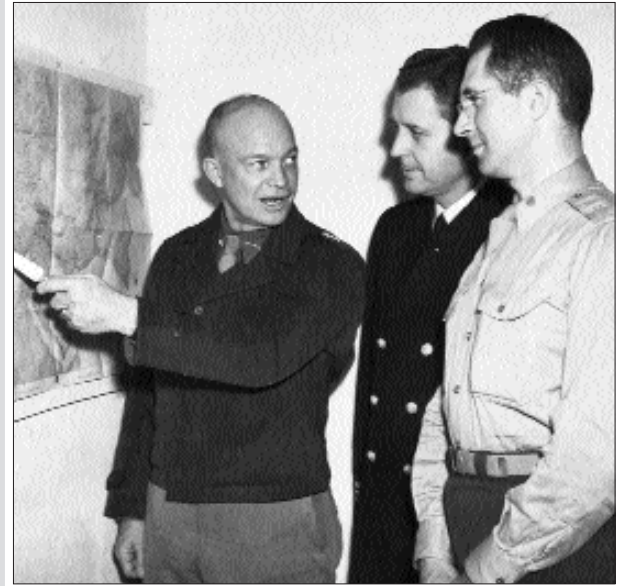
Ever since I learned, only a week ago, that Georgia had died, I have been trying to get a chance to write you a letter. This morning a letter from Art says that your father also passed away.

I am sure you must know how earnestly my sympathies go out to you. My oldest and warmest friends still live in Abilene and among them I counted with complete confidence both Georgia and your Father.

Last year I lost my Father and a brother, and my own terrible sense of loss tells me how deeply you are suffering. I hope that providence will give you the strength to help and that time will serve to dull the keenness of your distress.<sup>32</sup>

32. Dwight Eisenhower to Charley Case, March 22, 1943, *ibid.*

*Amid the crises of war, Ike's friends were grateful and honored that the general made time to respond to their letters.*



*ABOVE: In November 1942 Eisenhower instructs his aids, Harry Butcher and Ernest Lee, just before launching Operation Torch.*

*LEFT: Eisenhower joins General George Marshall at a June 1943 press conference in Algiers.*

*BELOW LEFT: Eisenhower confers with President Roosevelt at Casablanca, 1943.*

*BELOW: In June 1944 the general bids farewell to paratroopers about to depart for France.*



Although one could argue the use of such stock phrases as “dull the keenness of your distress” and “my sympathies go out to you” might indicate that this was simply a perfunctory condolence message, such a reading is unduly harsh. Although Eisenhower’s prose was clear and easily read, he was not a literary stylist and also was very busy; thus it is not surprising that he resorted to a stock phrase or two. Robert Griffith has observed that “there was a stiff, almost formal quality to most of his correspondence, even to family and good friends such as Swede [Hazlett].”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the rest of the letter to Case was much more personal. And when Ike learned a few weeks later that Charley Harger had suffered a similar loss, he wrote:

Ever since I heard, some days ago, of Mrs. Harger’s death, I’ve been wanting to write you a letter expressing my deep and sincere sympathy. To me, Abilene is not just a little town of neat stores and homes and shaded streets, it is an entire community of the oldest, best and truest friends I have in the world. The loss of any of them, or any loss suffered by any of them, is a tragedy for me. So in your grief I hope you will understand that an old Abilene boy, here in Africa, is earnestly praying to God that he will out of his great kindness and mercy, help you bear this burden.<sup>34</sup>

The general, of course, had distress of his own. In the days before he could take the time to write to Harger, or scribble “Ike” repeatedly on a page, the fighting in North Africa had been intense. After the American defeat at Kasserine Pass in February, Eisenhower had replaced Lloyd Fredendall, the commander of the beaten II Corp, with George S. Patton to rejuvenate the unit. Although victory in North Africa seemed near, it had taken longer than anticipated, and the invasion of Sicily was thus postponed. Eisenhower’s superiors deemed him largely responsible for the failure to take North Africa in timely fashion.<sup>35</sup> This delay meant that the Soviet Union would have to carry the major burden of the fighting still longer. Churchill communicated his hope to Eisenhower that the invasion of

Sicily (HUSKY) might still take place in June, but Eisenhower knew that it could not.<sup>36</sup> His superiors would be disappointed again.

In the midst of all these worries of late March 1943, Eisenhower told Hurd “every letter from you is worth twenty newspapers because you always tell me about people in whom I am truly interested.” Ike wanted to know if Mrs. Harger had really died; if so he would send a note to Mr. Harger. She had passed on, and Hurd apologized for not mentioning it in previous letters (as noted earlier, Ike sent a condolence letter). Eisenhower also complained about the hard work but acknowledged that he was far from alone in that situation. The cablegram from the gang at Joner’s had been “quite a thrill,” but, stung from the criticism of his conduct of the North African campaign in the press and from his superiors, Eisenhower imagined that his friends would also have their negative opinions:

Whenever this war is over and I get back to have a ten O’clock coke with the gang in his [Joner’s] store, we will probably develop a lot of arguments. Since I will want at least one on my side, I am going to enlist your services in advance, not because you are my friend but because I have always thought of you as one of the greatest lawyers in the world. When they start jumping on me about Darlan, Peyrouton, getting the bloody nose in central Tunisia, risking forces 500 miles from the nearest sea base, and a lot of other things concerning which they will have their own notions, I am surely going to need help. I would really prefer it if you had somewhat more of a foghorn voice because my own experience is that such arguments are never won but that the fellow who can talk the loudest and the longest usually carries the temporary honors from the field.<sup>37</sup>

This letter was a genuine effort to be folksy and familiar, to remind friends that he was still “Ike.” The man most responsible on a day to day basis for turning back the Axis forces in the Mediterranean envisioned at some future date that he might discuss the war and his decisions with small town bankers, farmers, merchants, and workingmen. Possessing enormous self-confidence, he saw himself good-

33. Robert W. Griffith, *Ike’s Letters to a Friend, 1941–1958* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1984), 6, 8.

34. Dwight Eisenhower to Charley Harger, April 8, 1943, Pre-Presidential Papers.

35. Carlo D’Este, *Patton: A Genius For War* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 456, 461, 462, 471, 475; Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President*, 85–89; Gerhard Weinberg, *A World At Arms: A Global History of World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 433–34.

36. Dwight Eisenhower to George Marshall, March 19, 1943, box 83, Cable File, Published Papers; Dwight Eisenhower to the Combined Chiefs of Staff, March 20, 1943, *ibid.*

37. Dwight Eisenhower to Art Hurd, March 22, 1943, *ibid.*

naturedly hearing them out, listening to what he should have done, and responding as to why he did what he did. Whether Eisenhower ever actually sat down and did this we cannot say with certainty, but we know he saw these friends after the war. More importantly, the letter does tell us that Ike wanted his friends to think of him as he used to be—their friend, just “Ike.” Clearly, in some corner of his mind, Eisenhower still identified with these people; in a later letter he even reiterated his desire to “join the debating society that meets in Callahan’s.”<sup>38</sup> Because he knew who he was and where he came from, Ike still wanted to hear about Abilene, the good news and bad. So Hurd, and others, told him how the crops were doing, that Carleton Kent (Hurd’s son-in-law) was on his way to the Middle East where he would fight with General Brereton’s Ninth Air Force, that Henry Giles died unexpectedly last Tuesday, that people were beginning to feel the impact of war rationing, that Ike’s reply to the gang’s congratulatory cable had gone immediately to Joner’s bulletin board, and that the page of Ike’s signatures had been distributed to the kids of Abilene. The letter Hurd wrote was long; perhaps he sensed that the general really needed to hear from home. Near the end he wrote these affirming words: “all of your friends keep telling me to send their regards to you when I write. The list of individuals would be too long to include in a letter so I will just say that the whole town sends its regards.”<sup>39</sup>

In spite of Hurd’s assurance of Abilene’s affection, Eisenhower worried that he might be appearing “high hat” to the folks at home because the press was hounding his mother for interviews and several Veterans of Foreign Wars posts were hoping to make him a member. In a relatively quick, appreciative response, Ike wrote that he wanted both Hurd and Case to know he did not consider himself better than them. “I depend upon you to give me advice about matters that affect me in the community that I claim as my own,” Eisenhower insisted. “So whenever you see me getting on the wrong foot, don’t hesitate to give me a little hell. As a matter of fact, when the time comes that you and Charley can’t take me in and pin my ears back occasionally, you will no longer be the friends that I have always counted you.” There was little Ike could

do about the press, but he wanted Hurd to know that if he joined any veterans posts it would be the one in Abilene. Within weeks Hurd had arranged for Ike to join the Abilene post.<sup>40</sup>

In late April Hurd wrote Ike about how his autographs were being used. One was a prize in a war bond drive, while others were given out as awards in school. Their popularity prompted Hurd to write in jest, “I am tempted to ask you for another page of them and then auction them off for cash and use the cash for the needy people in and about 820 Northwest Third Street.” Ike may or may not have gotten the joke—the Hurd family lived at 820 Northwest Third Street. In any case, Eisenhower promised to sign and send another sheet soon. He also let Hurd know that the news from the front was very good, and the fighting in North Africa would be over soon.<sup>41</sup>

On April 23, 1943, Eisenhower responded to a letter from Charley Harger in which the editor had told him that several magazine articles were being written on Ike, and that he (Harger) and Milton were making sure they were accurate. One in particular, by a writer named Robert Wilson, concerned the boxing match Ike had engaged in with Dirk Tyler in the summer after his second year at West Point. Harger sent Eisenhower a proof of the article. Tyler had a reputation as a fighter and had even fought some professional bouts; Ike’s reputation was based on his various adolescent fisticuffs. Some of the townsmen wanted to see the two fight because Tyler had become a bully, “ready to give anyone who annoyed him a beating.” Ike refused to fight until Tyler made it personal. The fight was an organized affair, not a street brawl. They enlisted a referee and scheduled several two-minute rounds. Although big and strong, Tyler really was not much of a fighter. Dwight knocked him out in a few seconds. The fight, as described by the media, Eisenhower wrote Harger, “is about as I remember it, although I notice the article did not say that Dirk was a colored boy. Not that this made any particular difference in Kansas, but I suppose the omission—which I approve—was somewhat motivated by the signs of the

38. Dwight Eisenhower to Art Hurd, May 6, 1943, Pre-Presidential Papers.

39. Art Hurd to Dwight Eisenhower, March 25, 1943, *ibid.*

40. Dwight Eisenhower to Art Hurd, April 3, 1943, *ibid.*; Hurd to Eisenhower, May 7, 1943, *ibid.*; Eisenhower to Hurd, June 3, 1943, *ibid.*

41. Art Hurd to Dwight Eisenhower, April 23, 1943, *ibid.*; Eisenhower to Hurd, May 12, 1943, *ibid.*



*Charley Case, another of Ike's Abilene friends, often looked in on the general's mother, Ida, despite Case's own worries. Case lost both his wife and his father during the war years.*

times. When you see Wilson tell him the article refreshed old memories at a time when I could use some refreshment."<sup>42</sup>

Eisenhower was not a racist, and the fight, at least for him, was not racially motivated. In the days after the fight Tyler had "so much fun poked at him" that Ike felt it necessary to tell his friends to leave Tyler alone.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, it is difficult to believe, contrary to Eisenhower's assertion concerning racism in Kansas, that racism was not still a factor in Abilene's social structure. Some of the townsmen's animosity toward Dirk was probably based on his color. The letter makes clear that Eisenhower did not want to make public the details of this fight that might allow someone to interpret it as racially motivated. Although the armed forces were still segregated, in the midst of war the nation needed as much unity as possible. The general did not want anyone to be able to use the details of

his past to divide the country. In the winter of 1944–1945 Eisenhower would order the creation and use of black combat platoons. The platoons were manned with volunteers from the service sectors of the army in which African Americans were generally employed. Thousands of these black soldiers volunteered and fought well, thus taking another step down the long road to desegregation and equality.<sup>44</sup>

In May Ike received a fine letter from Frances Curry who wrote him concerning a visit she had with his mother. Curry visited Ida one spring evening after dinner. Naomi Engle, Ida's live-in helper, read one of Dwight's letters that evening as they all sat around the kitchen table. Ike had written that Ida was the "most wonderful mother in the world." Curry wrote that when that part was read "Ida just beamed" and then Ida said, "of course, that doesn't mean anything." But, Curry added, when Ida said that she "blushed like a girl." The rest of the letter brought Ike's mother close and his boyhood home alive once again:

[Ida] was glowing with happiness and health. Since she is able to get out into the garden and dig, her eyes are shining, her cheeks are rosy, and even the tip of

42. Charley Harger to Dwight Eisenhower, March 20, 1943, *ibid.*; Kenneth S. Davis, *Dwight D. Eisenhower: Soldier of Democracy* (New York: Konecky and Konecky, 1945), 140–44; Eisenhower to Charley Harger, April 23, 1943, Pre-Presidential Papers.

43. Davis, *Dwight D. Eisenhower: Soldier of Democracy*, 143.

44. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President*, 370.

*As Eisenhower's role in the war increased, his prominence in the media grew as well. His Midwest roots and his boyhood years in his hometown of Abilene were frequently the reporters' focus, as was the case in this 1943 feature article in the Chicago Sunday Tribune. The following year a reporter from the Chicago Record Herald arrived in Abilene hoping to see the letters Ike wrote home to his Abilene friends. Charley Case refused to turn his over, and Ike sincerely thanked him, writing, "Nothing I detest more than to have my private letters made public. Good for you for refusing."*



her nose vies with the blossoms of the redbud trees which are blooming all over the town.

We sat with the west door open, and not only the dining room, but the whole house, was bathed in the warm evening sunlight of early spring. They showed me the grand pictures which the photographers from some big magazine had taken of your mother—such large and such homey scenes! I wish they would send them to you—it would be the next best thing to an actual visit home; but Naomi said they were afraid they might get lost. I am afraid were it I, that I would take the chance; one can always get more pictures. We talked of you; and just talked. Your mother is always so happy when we get down for a visit that I always go away refreshed. So maybe this little second hand visit will help to refresh you, also, and to lighten your burdens a little.

That is the real purpose of this note, Dwight—don't feel you must send a reply. I am so busy here, fighting the war on the home front, working in the government shop in Abilene, that I seem to have very little time for personal correspondence—so, how could you?<sup>45</sup>

Of course, Eisenhower did reply, complimenting Curry on her “genius” for telling him about all of the people and things he wanted to hear about, and thanking her for taking the trouble to write. Then he added:

Your story of sitting in the dining room with the west door open and the sunlight streaming through, fairly made me homesick for mother, the old home, and the whole town. But it has not taken me fifty-two years to discover that at heart I am nothing else but an Abilenite and damned proud of it. The people in town that I usually correspond with are Art Hurd, Charley Case, Mr. Harger, with an occasional letter to others. Every time I inspect any troops, I am constantly looking for boys from Kansas.<sup>46</sup>

The former small-town Kansas boy finished the letter wishing he could come home. He even asserted that if going AWOL for a day would allow him to visit Ida for that time he would do it. Curry's letter would have to suffice.

45. Frances Curry to Dwight Eisenhower, April 18, 1943, Pre-Presidential Papers.

46. Dwight Eisenhower to Frances Curry, May 17, 1943, *ibid.*

On the eve of the Allied victory in North Africa, Charley Case wrote to Ike. He had seen the general in the newsreels as the press was making much of the impending victory. He told Ike how he appreciated his letter of condolence on the passing of his wife and father; understandably, Case was lonely and not feeling very well. Still, he told Eisenhower that he had managed to see the general's mother twice in the last few weeks, and she was just fine.<sup>47</sup>

In late May Eisenhower received a playful letter from Hurd in which he pretended that his ten-month-old grandson was actually writing the letter. The letter caused the general to wish that he were home once again:

My Daddy is a war correspondent for the Chicago Times and the last time I heard from him he was in Bombay India. He has traveled a lot. He has been in Australia, New Zealand, New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Kansas City.

I am almost ten months old and I enjoy strenuous exercise. My Grandfather says that I can put him down and out in exactly fifteen minutes but I think that he is bragging.

A few days ago I had a date with Mrs. Eisenhower [Mamie] but I went to sleep and missed it. I am very sorry. It is the first time I ever broke a date with a girl.<sup>48</sup>

Apparently the "date" took place at the Abilene railroad station. Eisenhower wrote to Art that "it is difficult for me to think of a sum equal to what I would have paid for the privilege of being with you for that few moments."<sup>49</sup>

In the same letter Ike confided to Hurd, in the strictest confidence, that a prominent publishing firm had offered him "at least \$25,000.00" for his story. The general, self-described as a "poor man," got a real kick out of replying that he was "too busy to be interested." He was amazed that any reputable firm would approach him while the war continued. Hurd got a chuckle out of the story as Ike thought he would, and then the lawyer gave his friend some very solid advice:

I censored your letter of June 3 by cutting out one paragraph and then I burned the clipping. The information contained in that paragraph was very interesting and somewhat startling, especially to a country

lawyer. I agree with your conclusions and decisions. I am sure that similar or better offers will be made in the future when you will be able to accept them if you wish to do so. If this incident could have been brought to the attention of the late O. O. McIntyre, he would have used his famous phrase, "Another small town boy has made good in the city."<sup>50</sup>

Hurd also related how spring flooding was impacting Abilene and the Midwest in general. The Mississippi and Missouri Rivers were both over their banks that May. Mud Creek had almost inundated Abilene; and there was still some danger that the Smoky Hill River would flood. Hurd lamented how two of his own farms had been flooded five times in the past three years.<sup>51</sup>

In his response to Art's letter Eisenhower admitted that he had worried a great deal about recent operations in the Mediterranean. As the North African campaign was concluding Eisenhower considered, at Marshall's suggestion, launching an impromptu attack on Sicily in the hope of taking advantage of German and Italian confusion. He decided against this suggestion because he did not have enough shipping to place sufficient troops on Sicily to provide a reasonable chance of success. Once again his superiors and others criticized him for being too cautious. As he explained to Art, he decided instead to take Pantelleria and Lampedusa, two islands between Tunis and Sicily. Pantelleria in particular was seemingly impregnable and featured an airfield of great strategic importance. Eisenhower intended to use this airfield to provide air support for HUSKY. It is clear in the letter to Hurd that Eisenhower took pride in how carefully the operations against these two islands were planned. An impromptu attack, of the kind Eisenhower decided against, was contrary to the nature of a man who had spent virtually his entire career involved in planning. The decision to take Pantelleria and Lampedusa was a prudent yet aggressive compromise. When those operations succeeded Ike confessed his relief to Hurd that they "went through without a single hitch."<sup>52</sup>

50. Ibid.; Art Hurd to Dwight Eisenhower, June 18, 1943, *ibid.* Hurd's advice was prescient. Eisenhower would make \$635,000 from the publishing rights to his story *Crusade in Europe*. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President*, 281.

51. Perret, *Eisenhower*, 23, 24.

52. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President*, 128–35; Dwight Eisenhower to Art Hurd, June 23 1943, Pre-Presidential Papers; Eisenhower to Marshall, May 5, 1943, Published Papers. Tedder was commander in chief of the Mediterranean Air Command; Cunningham was commander in chief of the Allied fleet in the Mediterranean.

47. Charley Case to Dwight Eisenhower, May 7, 1943, *ibid.*; Eisenhower to Winston Churchill, May 10, 1943, Published Papers.

48. Carleton Hurd Kent to Dwight Eisenhower, May 20, 1943, Pre-Presidential Papers.

49. Dwight Eisenhower to Art Hurd, June 3, 1943, *ibid.*



In late July Charley Case wrote the general with depressing news:

Unless you have already heard I have some sad news for you. Last Sunday our friend and pal Art [Hurd] passed away—he had been in failing health for some time. His old skin disease got worse then he developed swollen glands in his neck and body which proved to be Hodgkin’s disease, and which, as you know, is fatal. He had been out of the house for a month but we still felt he would make the grade and no one knew of this other condition until ten days ago. His weight shrank to a mere 85 pounds. The services were at the home Tuesday. The house was packed with friends from here and all over Kansas and the floral tribute was marvelous. The three girls were here but George could not come. . . . You and I lost a good friend, loyal pal and everything. He thought the world of you and was so proud of your fine friendship. . . . We are all about the same in the old hometown—our ranks are getting thinner each day—both young and old. Joner still holds forth at the old stand. . . . Kansas is hot—but plenty of rain and good crops. Write me when you can.<sup>53</sup>

Eisenhower was more than occupied with the invasion of Sicily, but the death of Art Hurd affected him deeply. He thanked Case on August 10 and wrote: “I had received the news only a few days before and have already written a short note to Maud [Hurd’s wife]. I have had no blow in a long time that was so distressing to me as this one—certainly not since my father’s death more than a year ago. Art was a fine friend to us both. I shall never forget him.”<sup>54</sup> Ike also wrote to Charley Harger concerning Hurd’s death. Here the emphasis was on the quality of their friend’s life:

This brings to my mind the essential value and virtue in a life such as Art Hurd’s. A sound, helpful citizen, always ready to think clearly and analytically and to speak his mind without particular regard for his own immediate fortunes—he was the type that this world cannot afford to lose. No words of mine could possibly express the depth of my distress in the loss of such a close and valued friend; but be-

yond this, I feel that the community has lost a citizen of the type that has made Kansas the great state that it is.<sup>55</sup>

It is an obvious, yet subtly dissonant truth, that life and death went on in wartime America even for those who were not fighting on some foreign field. Charley Case felt the losses on both fronts, and Hurd’s death saddened a man who often saw the human results of combat. In contemplating Hurd’s life and death Ike probably realized that his old friend had made no reference in any letter to his own deteriorating health. Those letters were about home, friends, family, and Abilene’s unfailing support for the war. Moreover, it is clear that he faced a painful death with quiet grace and dignity.

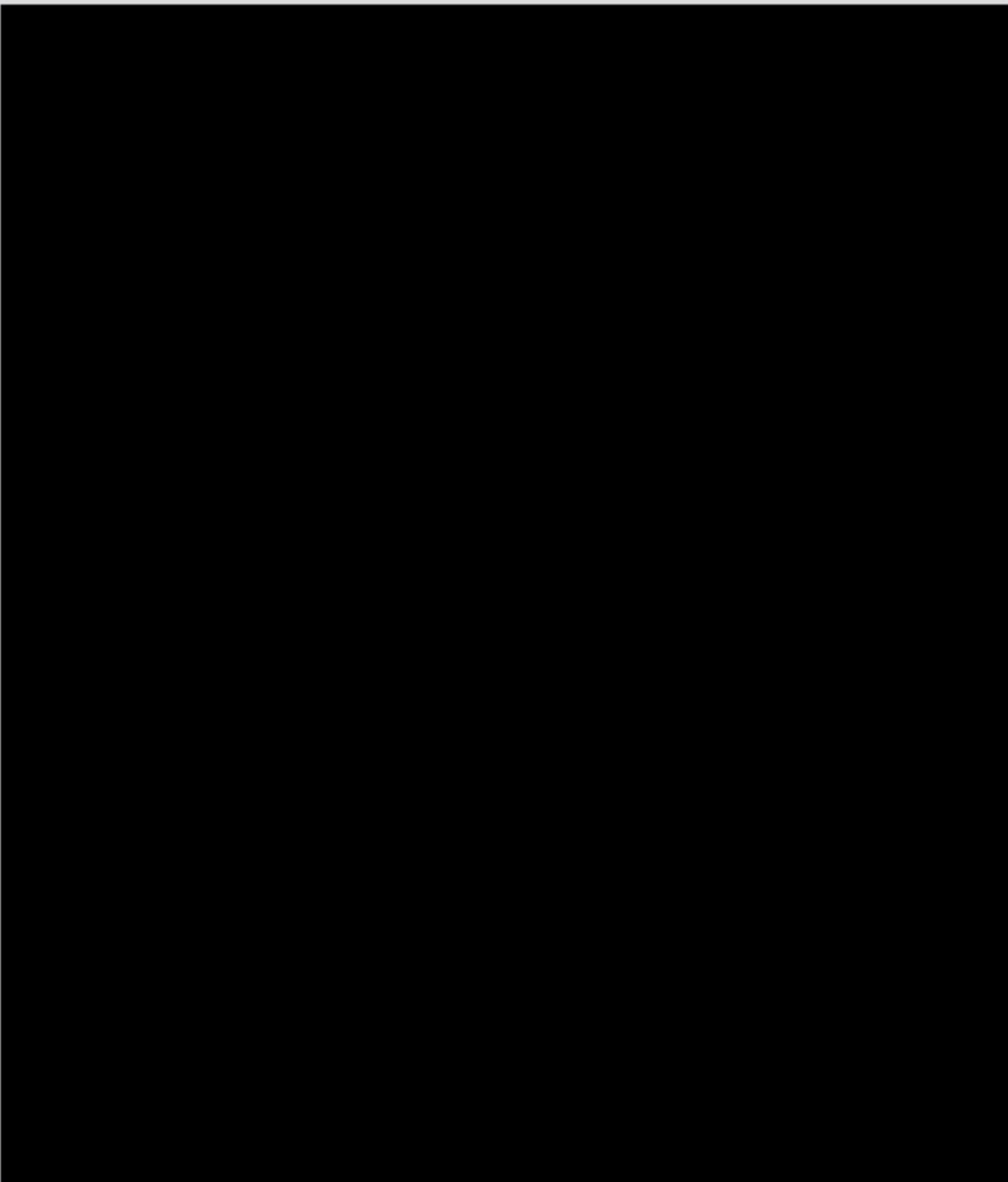
Eisenhower drew strength from the heartland of America. In his letter to Harger he wrote about the sacrifices made by the American GI. But he went on to say that the higher commanders needed to find some source, some “inexhaustible fund” of nervous energy, determination, and optimism. The general believed he found these things, in part, in his Abilene roots: “I have often felt, in my own case, that a fine constitution and an upbringing by upright, intelligent, and understanding parents in a wholesome and healthful country, like our great Midwest, has sustained me in many hours of crisis.”<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps suspecting that Eisenhower was under “unusual strain” in July and August 1943, Frances Curry wrote one of her descriptive letters to Ike in the hope that it would give him some small respite. She wrote about another evening she spent sitting on the west porch of the Eisenhower home. She saw the children playing on the old Lincoln school grounds and wondered what they would do if Ike were there to play with them: “I thought how thrilled they would be at your presence—and doubtless awed into artificiality until your own self snapped them out of it.” Then she told the general how she read his last letter to Ida and how his mother loved it. Curry had also seen a recent newsreel in which Ike had received a medal from the French. She acted out the ceremony for Ida in the kitchen showing how General Giraud had given her son the traditional French greeting of kisses on each cheek. These kisses apparently caused a chuckle in theater audiences and con-

53. Dwight Eisenhower to Art Hurd, June 23 1943, Pre-Presidential Papers; Charley Case to Eisenhower, July 23, 1943, *ibid.*; *Abilene Reflector-Chronicle*, July 19, 1943.

54. Dwight Eisenhower to Charley Case, August 10, 1943, Pre-Presidential Papers.

55. Dwight Eisenhower to Charley Harger, August 18, 1943, *ibid.*  
56. *Ibid.*



*Ike was constantly concerned for his mother, whose health declined during the years Ike was absent. In January 1944, just prior to beginning his new assignment as commander of Operation Overlord, Eisenhower came to Abilene for a brief rest and visit with his mother.*

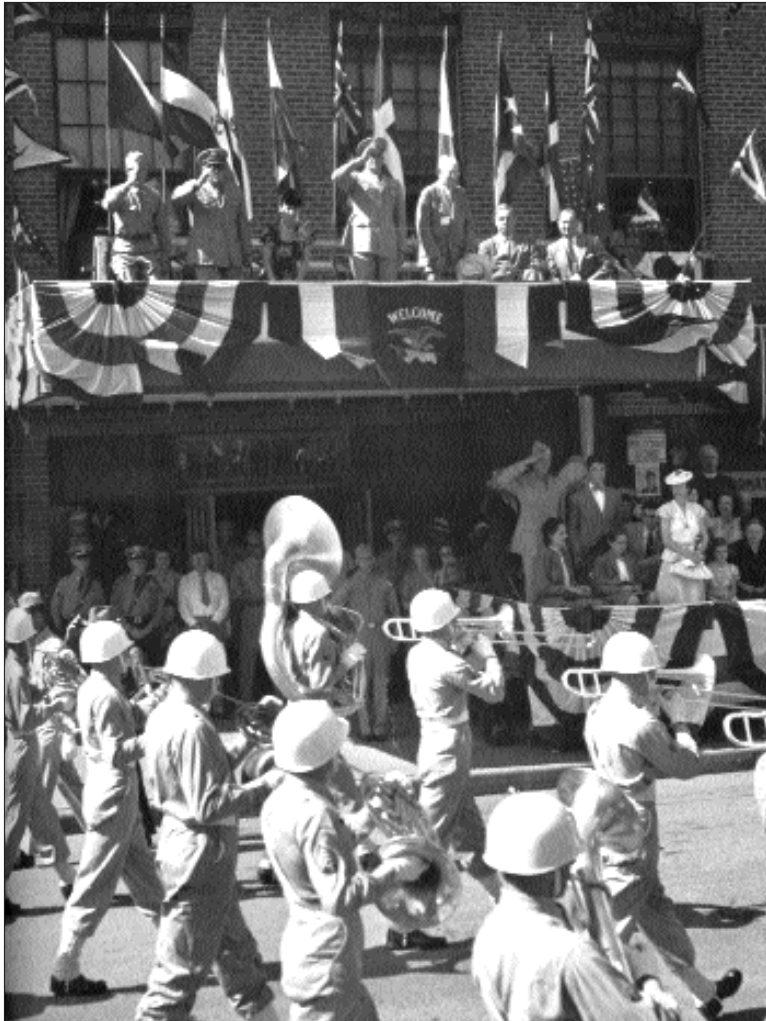
siderable talk in Abilene about how Ike must have loathed them. "One of my old friends asked what Abilenites would say if they ever saw a picture showing me getting kissed on each cheek" by a male, wrote Eisenhower in reply. "While I admit that I was just a bit terror stricken at the prospect, I figured out at the same time that those that knew the Eisenhower tribe of boys would be sure that it was something I wasn't seeking, but to which I could scarcely object." Curry also wrote how Ida was in such great health, although past eighty years of age, that she was thinking about taking her first airplane trip with Ike once the war was over. Curry thought Ida's spirit of adventure was wonderful and like her own; she remarked, "I am the only one of us girls [her sisters] who has ever flown or would even think of such a thing." The letter is an amusing and charming reminder that airplane rides and American males receiving kisses from Frenchmen were rare occurrences in the Midwest of

the 1940s. Curry went on to tell Ike of all of the Abilene boys now in the service and where they were stationed. She finished with the assurance that everything was right at home and thanked him for "doing so much for us and all the world. . . . God be with you always."<sup>57</sup>

Eisenhower's allied forces were indeed doing much in the summer of 1943. With significant advances in the Mediterranean under way, he told Curry the first ten days of September were especially stressful. He had conducted a self-evaluation of his job performance as commander of allied forces and found himself too cautious in both North Africa and Sicily.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, he had had to unofficially rep-

57. Dwight Eisenhower to Frances Curry, September 8, 1943, Presidential Papers; Curry to Eisenhower, July 31, 1943, *ibid.*

58. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President*, 107.



*The general comes home. Eisenhower salutes a homecoming parade given in his honor in Abilene, June 22, 1945.*

rimand George Patton for striking an enlisted man, negotiate surrender of the new Italian government of Marshal Pietro Badoglio, and plan the invasion of Italy since the German Army still controlled much of the country. Nevertheless, Eisenhower found the time to write, and he complimented Curry on the letter she had written. Ike appreciated her “knack for giving me a picture of my mother in her home that is almost as vivid as if I could see her myself.”<sup>59</sup>

59. Ibid., 107–8; Dwight Eisenhower to Combined Chiefs of Staff, September 1, 1943, Cable File, Published Papers; Eisenhower to Harold Alexander, September 2, 1943, *ibid.*; Eisenhower to George Marshall, September 6, 1943, *ibid.*; Eisenhower to Frances Curry, September 8, 1943, Pre-Presidential Papers.

In August 1943 Case wrote Ike a chatty letter in which he complained about the difficult business conditions. Case had recently sold five hundred head of cattle—no profit. But he still felt all right because most cattlemen had lost substantial amounts on their investments that year. The problem was, at least in part, the ceiling on beef prices, part of the government effort to control wartime profits. Harger reported that people were growing more accustomed to the various regulations but were “still mad about it all.”<sup>60</sup>

Joner Callahan hit upon an idea in September that would help his own business and aid U.S. soldiers in Eu-

60. Charley Case to Dwight Eisenhower, August 17, 1943, Pre-Presidential Papers; Charley Harger to Eisenhower, November 20, 1943, *ibid.*

rope. Callahan placed an add in the newspaper stating that individuals could buy cartons of cigarettes at his store at discounted prices. The cigarettes would be sent to General Eisenhower for distribution to soldiers in his command. Eisenhower received the cigarettes and gave them to soldiers in the various hospitals that he visited. The general loved Callahan's idea and asked him to thank everyone who participated. "Every time I receive renewed evidence of the way the home front is standing behind my fighting men," Ike wrote, "it gives me a warm feeling inside."<sup>61</sup>

That November Frances Curry wrote Dwight a Christmas letter. She wished him a happy Christmas in spite of the circumstances: "the Peace of the Season must necessarily be in one's own heart at such a time." No doubt Curry's news about Ida cheered Ike. She was doing very well, enjoying outings, and the beautiful "Indian summer" autumn had helped keep her refreshed. Frances also reported how Dwight's brother Milton's presence in Manhattan had been a boon to Ida. Both Frances and Ida were aware that Dwight might soon be returning to the states to become chief of staff. But Frances wanted Ike to know that Ida, although she would obviously be delighted should he return home, supported him regardless: "she feels just as I do about your possible return . . . we want it to be your way—to complete one's own job is the real reward for effort. Still, we know you are a soldier—and that is enough said—plenty!" Curry went on to explain how the war impacted her life and closed: "Honor has its own place as a just reward; but, Dwight, it is a lot more than worldly honor for which I know you are working so hard. And that is the way we all pray for you—for your safety, guidance and success in God's name—and that is the reward. The girls all send their best wishes and prayers."<sup>62</sup>

In December 1943 Eisenhower learned from FDR himself that he, not Marshall, would command Overlord—the cross-channel invasion of France's Normandy coast—and the rest of the Allied campaign in western Europe. Roosevelt gave Marshall the opportunity to simply take the job; but Marshall refused to make this decision because his own career was involved; he told the president he would serve wherever he was sent. FDR could not bring himself

to part with the selfless Marshall as chief of staff, especially when he had Eisenhower to appoint to the command in Europe.<sup>63</sup>

Once FDR had made his decision, Marshall, realizing that the commander of Overlord could use a break before beginning his new assignment, ordered Eisenhower home for a short rest. In January Ike visited Mamie and even made it as far as Abilene to see his mother for a quick and quiet visit. This was very much a working vacation. There were conferences with Marshall and a long talk with the president. Then, before he and Mamie had really readjusted to being together again, he was on his way back to England.<sup>64</sup>

In his March 1944 letter Case called Ike a "fox" for coming home on the sly, and then turned his attention to Kansas politics and news about Abilene's people. Case reported that all party factions had disappeared in the effort to unseat FDR. Wendell Wilkie was fading but Tom Dewey seemed to be gaining popularity. Kansas was going to send an uninstructed delegation to the Republican convention in Chicago. "Trouble with our party really is," lamented Case, "we do not have one outstanding candidate. Looks to me that FDR will go in again." Case also wrote that "Our old town is about on the brink—each week the draft takes fifty or more of our boys—now most of them married with families." But Case, although sad at the prospect that so many men were going to war, was proud of the way Abilene's people had responded to the conflict. Abilenites had exceeded quotas on bond drives and blood drives and were now marching off to war in staggering numbers. Finally, Case told Ike that a reporter from the *Chicago Record Herald* had been in town to do an article about Dwight. This reporter had insisted that Case give her the letters that Ike had written him, as she had with some of Ike's other correspondents. Case refused to give them to her.<sup>65</sup>

The general responded almost immediately to Case's letter. Foremost on his mind was the security of his correspondence, and he warmly thanked Charley for refusing to give his letters to the reporter: "Nothing I detest more than to have my private letters made public. Good for you for

61. Jonah Callahan to Dwight Eisenhower, September 24, 1943, box 17, Cale-Came file, Pre-Presidential Papers; Eisenhower to Callahan, October 20, 1943, *ibid.*

62. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President*, 114; Frances Curry to Dwight Eisenhower, November 22, 1943, Pre-Presidential Papers.

63. Forrest C. Pogue, *The United States Army in World War II, The European Theater of Operations, The Supreme Command* (Washington D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1954), 32; Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President*, 116-116; Larrabee, *Commander in Chief*, 148-50.

64. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President*, 117-23; Dwight Eisenhower to Frances Curry, February 3, 1944, Pre-Presidential Papers.

65. Charley Case to Dwight Eisenhower, March 15, 1944, *ibid.*

refusing." Some of the things he had said about tough decisions or disappointments could have been embarrassing. He was concerned enough about this issue to tell General Marshall that a reporter had gotten a hold of some of his letters.<sup>66</sup> When Eisenhower learned that Frances Curry was among those who had shown their correspondence with the general to the reporter, he wrote: "I must confess that it was a shock to me to hear that you had turned over some of my letters to a newspaper reporter." Then he softened the rebuke allowing that no real harm had been done and encouraged Frances to write again as no one else told him of his mother as skillfully as she does. Both of these letters were short, no time for pleasantries. Indeed, in a letter to his mother he even worried that some of his friends might be offended that he had not written.<sup>67</sup> But he was simply too busy; D-Day was just two months away.

In early May, Curry responded to the general's "bawling out" over the letter issue. (She had earlier sent an apology that may have crossed Dwight's letter in the mail.) Curry explained how horrible she felt over the whole mess and that it was all done with the best of intentions. The letter went on to describe an accidental meeting she had had with Ida and Ike's brother Edgar. "I don't know what they are going to do with me," Ida reportedly told Curry. "[T]hey can't find anything wrong with me, physically. . . . It just looks like I am going to live forever."<sup>68</sup>

Curry then turned to bad news and suggested Ike might want to write Joe Curry. His health had been poor for years, "dating back to the last war," and he had four sons in the current war. "Within the last several weeks, we have received a stunning blow—official word that his second son, Bob, met his death shot down over Burma. He was one wonderful fellow, a typical flyer with all the attributes and qualifications they used to require, just married and with a babe which I believe he never saw." She knew "that Joe and his wife Mary, too, would appreciate more than you could know a note from you." In June the general wrote Joe and Mary Curry to express his "deepest sympathy in your sad loss. I know, at a time like this,

words are no help at all, but I just want you to know that I feel deeply for you."<sup>69</sup>

The invasion of Normandy took place on June 6, 1944, after Dwight Eisenhower made one of the loneliest decisions in history: to go or not to go in the midst of a severe spring storm over the English Channel. Frances Curry waited more than two weeks to write, and Ike would not respond until October; the fate of Europe, perhaps of the world, was being decided around the city of Caen and amongst the hedgerows of the Norman countryside. But Eisenhower no doubt was pleased to learn that Ida was doing well. Curry wrote that they had had "a grand visit. She saw me coming up onto the porch, through the window, and she bounded to the door as spry as a cricket. She was really a patriotic study—with her cheeks a glowing red, her white hair done up in pin-curls, and the blue of her frock making a picture of happy, contented normalcy—an oasis in this cockeyed world." Ida still enjoyed working in the yard and the place looked as nice as ever. Edgar and some of the Curry girls had attended Ida's birthday recently. "Everybody had a lovely time" as the family's memories were "hashed over." Curry assured Eisenhower that his mother was still placid and serene in spite of the intensified fighting in France. All, of course, were eager for the war to end, and many Americans now thought it might be over before Christmas. Curry even promised Ike that when he returned she would let him do all the talking: "now isn't that some concession! Remember the last time, when we were both talking at the same time, till the tears of laughter ran down your mother's rosy cheeks?"<sup>70</sup>

Ike also wanted the war over, but the Germans were not cooperating. They kept General Bernard Montgomery's British forces contained near Caen with major elements of their armored strength, while they relied on the difficult hedgerow country of western Normandy to help constrain the Americans. It was late July before Eisenhower, Montgomery, and especially General Omar Bradley could engineer an American breakout into open country. Finally, Ike found the time to write to Curry. He had heard, through Frances and others, that newsmen continued to

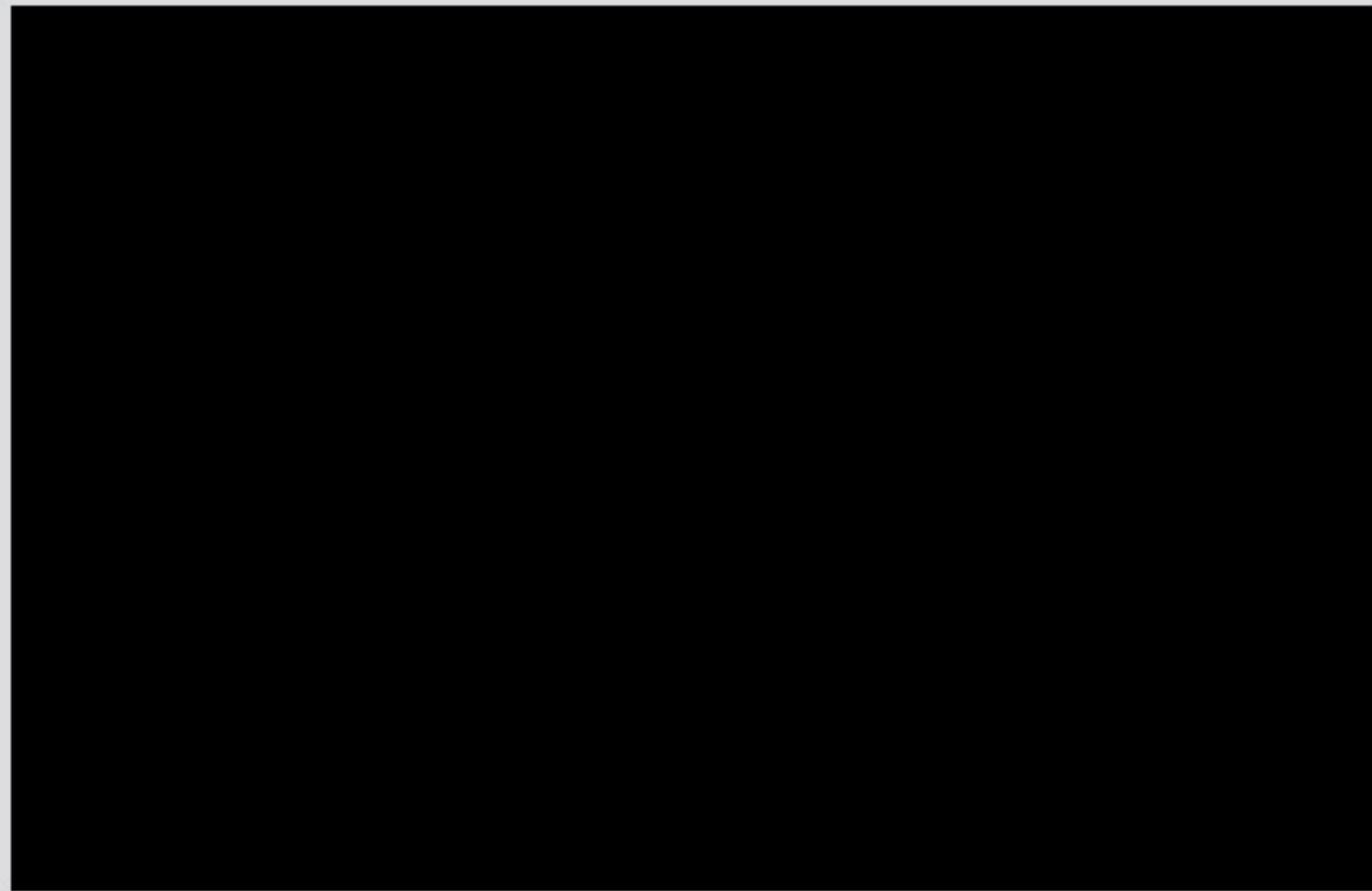
66. Dwight Eisenhower to George Marshall, March 21, 1944, Cable File, Published Papers; Eisenhower to Charley Case, Pre-Presidential Papers.

67. Dwight Eisenhower to Frances Curry, April 3, 1944, Pre-Presidential Papers; Dwight Eisenhower to Ida Eisenhower, March 31, 1944, Family File, Published Papers.

68. Frances Curry to Dwight Eisenhower, May 7, 1944, Pre-Presidential Papers.

69. *Ibid.*; Dwight Eisenhower to Joe Curry, June 25, 1944, box 19, Culm-Curtis file, Pre-Presidential Papers; Curry to Eisenhower, May 7, 1944, *ibid.*

70. Frances Curry to Dwight Eisenhower, June 23, 1944, *ibid.*



*Ever proud of its favorite son, Abilene created this sign to a grateful general, who was equally proud of his Kansas hometown.*

hound his mother and that Naomi Engle seemed to encourage such activity. He suspected that Engle was simply too unsophisticated to deal with these people, and he hoped that his brother Milton might be able to provide his mother some peace. Ike then asked Curry to write again because his mother could no longer write easily, and because, "Naomi does send me a note about every month or so but she does not give me as vivid a picture of mother's health and condition as you do. I always feel grateful to you."<sup>71</sup>

In July, a year after Art Hurd's death, Charley Case wrote to Ike. He told the general that his favorite war photograph was the one showing Eisenhower and Winston Churchill walking together: "in my own mind and in the minds also of our American people he stands out as one of the grandest figures history has ever known—that goes for you too." Case then related how historian Kenneth S. Davis had been in town working on his biography of Dwight (*Dwight D. Eisenhower: Soldier of Democracy*). Case and Edgar Eisenhower corrected "some erroneous statements about your past, including the boxing match you had with

Dirk Tyler in the Tiptop basement." Then Case turned to some local news. He was justifiably proud that Dickinson County had exceeded its war loan goal of one and a quarter million dollars—beat it by four-hundred-thousand dollars. Case went on about how his grandchildren were with him that summer, and the wheat harvest was quite good. He also apologized for not writing, but "knowing too well how busy you have been and still are . . . our thoughts hearts and prayers have been right with you."<sup>72</sup>

On August 22 Ike responded with a short note, gently chiding Case to write more often: "It's quite a while since you last wrote." At the bottom of the letter he wrote in his own hand, "Give my mother a ring if you can—will you please?" These were difficult yet exhilarating days in France. It was in the third week of August that Eisenhower hoped to trap large elements of the German army between two great pincers of Allied forces: Montgomery in the North and Patton in the South. Unfortunately, the Germans also realized the significance of the fighting at the Falaise Gap and managed to keep the door of escape open

71. Dwight Eisenhower to Frances Curry, October 8, 1944, *ibid.*

72. Charley Case to Dwight Eisenhower, July 15, 1944, *ibid.*

to the east longer than Ike had hoped. Although a victory had been won and the Germans were retreating en masse toward the Rhine, the Allies had failed to capture as many Germans as Eisenhower anticipated.<sup>73</sup>

Case did one better than Ike had asked. He went to see Ida when the general's son was visiting his grandmother. Both of them were fine, and Case was impressed with how much John Eisenhower looked like his father. Abilene was about the same, "no new losses." The gang all had quite a time at Joner's when they gathered to listen to Mutual Broadcasting's celebration of Dwight's birthday that came over the airwaves on Salina's KSAL.<sup>74</sup>

Ike loved the recording of his birthday celebration that Case and others put together. He particularly got a kick out of the "birthday greetings" each of his friends had added to the tape. His reply was written on December 8, 1944, three years since the United States had entered the war, and on the eve of another Christmas season away from home and family. The general wrote:

It seems a long time to me [since the war began] and I am most anxious to have it over with and come home. When I think of how long England and some of the others have been in it, I feel a bit ashamed of myself for voicing anything that sounds like a complaint. Nevertheless, I still wish it were over. Give my very best to all my friends and, as always, warmest regards to yourself.<sup>75</sup>

Dwight Eisenhower did not love war in the way that some soldiers, some generals, do. Indeed, he hated it. Stephen Ambrose has suggested that Eisenhower, more than any American commander, had the trust of the American people when it came to the well being of their sons and husbands. The families of American soldiers sensed that Ike valued every GI, that he understood "each casualty meant a grieving family back home."<sup>76</sup> Perhaps this was because of

73. Dwight Eisenhower to Charley Case, August 22, 1944, Pre-Presidential Papers; Eisenhower to George Marshall, August 11, 1944, Published Papers; Eisenhower to Marshall, August 17, 1944, *ibid.*; Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President*, 153. The Allied armies took about fifty thousand prisoners from the Falaise pocket and killed about ten thousand more Germans in the fighting. Still, forty thousand escaped to fight another day, hence the general's disappointment.

74. Charley Case to Dwight Eisenhower, October 10, 1944, Pre-Presidential Papers.

75. Dwight Eisenhower to Charley Case, December 8, 1944, *ibid.*

76. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President*, 128–29; Dwight Eisenhower to George Marshall, February 25, 1945, Published Papers.

his own rich family life, his own intimate small-town upbringing. Unfortunately, that Christmas was the occasion of tragic news for many American families. Adolf Hitler launched his last major offensive in the west on December 16, 1944: the Battle of the Bulge. The battle lasted into February 1945 and caused seventy thousand American casualties. But Eisenhower and his soldiers responded with skill and resolution and in the end the Germans retreated; having lost much of their armor, they were now far less able to resist the final Allied advance.<sup>77</sup>

In March 1945, just two months before the war in Europe ended, Maud Hurd gave Charley Case a tongue lashing for not writing to Ike. So Case wrote. He in turn lectured Ike for "taking too many chances." In late February Eisenhower had toured the front held by the American Ninth Army and part of the First Army. As was his custom he spoke with the soldiers on the front, a custom that involved some risk. The practice had a tremendous impact on morale and provided information he could get in no other way. The trip confirmed Eisenhower in his belief that the offensive should continue with the intent of capturing large numbers of German soldiers on the west side of the Rhine. It was probably this tour, highlighted in the newsreels, that caused Case's concern. Ike's old friend reminded him: "after all you are more essential to the whole. . . . Please do not stick that firm precious neck of yours out too far. . . . you have plenty of guts without trying to prove it."<sup>78</sup> Case probably had no faith that his friend would pay any attention to his advice, but it was a way of saying he cared about Ike and that his thoughts were with him. Case went on to brag about the old hometown as he had on previous occasions: the Red Cross drive was exceeding goals and bank deposits had passed three million dollars; and then there was also sad news:

Our poor old friend Harry Kruger is still around—his boy was all shot up—now out of the army—really a good boy. Harry Harding—Old Shub—as we called him, died the other day with a heart attack. A

77. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President*, 170–80; Weinberg, *A World At Arms*, 765–70.

78. Dwight Eisenhower to George Marshall, March 2, 1945, Published Papers; Eisenhower to Omar N. Bradley and Jacob L. Devers, March 8, 1945, *ibid.*; Charley Case to Eisenhower, March 16, 1945, Pre-Presidential Papers.

good boy. When he went in the other war he dropped me a postal on his way across—it said: Strawberries, ice cream—fried chicken. Sherman was wrong.

Although he had not seen Ida, Charley had called to see how she was doing. She had taken a fall but she was doing “okay.” The draft board was having a terrible time: acrimony among its members, so Case had agreed to take a position there to help restore order. He was successful. Of course, everybody was looking forward to the war being over.<sup>79</sup>

Dwight had not heard from Charley Harger for some time so at the end of March 1945 he wrote to the old editor himself: “It has been so long since I have had a word from you, that I cannot tell who owes whom a letter. I am assuming that I am the guilty one, because I assure you I have been really busy.” The letter went on to describe the military situation: “we are going very well indeed and are well established across the Rhine.” Ike was disappointed that the Germans continued to fight but blamed their Nazi leaders who were “determined to carry the nation down to destruction with themselves; and those leaders, using persistent propaganda and enforcement based upon terror and fear, have succeeded in keeping the population fighting far beyond the point of reason and good sense.” The letter closed with Ike’s expressed desire to return home to Abilene for a visit, “now with far more assurance [that he could come home soon] than I did a year ago.”<sup>80</sup>


Eisenhower did not have long to wait. On May 7, 1945, Adolf Hitler’s “thousand year Reich,” a state whose alleged strength was the superiority of its Aryan race, ended at the hands of a coalition that encompassed a wide assortment of races and creeds. Dwight Eisenhower, once the boy who had left his small midwestern town to go off to West Point, was now the general who had led the western European arm of the victorious forces. Although he had changed in many ways, he still identified with his home, his friends, and Abilene.

As the victorious general prepared for his trip home and reunion with family and friends, he wrote Charley Case:

While, as you well know, I would prefer to make my home coming to Abilene in the exact way I have al-

ways done it—that is merely to come in and visit my mother and then to walk up town to drop in on my various friends—I well know that this is impossible. However, I hope the formal part of the thing is soon finished so that you and Mr. Harger, the Sniders, Joner, and my other friends can sit down with me for a quiet and undisturbed talk. This also may be a fatuous hope. Anyway, I will get to see you.<sup>81</sup>

**T**he general came home at the end of June 1945. He gave a speech to Congress and was celebrated in New York City where he said, “I am just a Kansas farm boy who did his duty.” Then he truly came home. He was right, of course, that he could not come home to Abilene as he always had before. Twenty thousand Kansans, and no doubt a few people from out of state as well, welcomed Ike home. Abilene burst both with pride and humanity as the town’s population was normally less than five thousand. That day in the city park, Dwight Eisenhower spoke to friends, family, and fellow Americans and proclaimed: “Through this world it has been my fortune, or misfortune, to wander at considerable distances. . . . Never has this town been outside my heart and memory.”<sup>82</sup>

Throughout the war the commanding general of the Allied forces in western Europe had faced unimaginable stress, enormous decisions, and the conscious thought that his mistakes, some of them unavoidable, would cost the lives of thousands of young men. Through this ordeal Eisenhower had been psychologically and emotionally supported in many ways, from many sources. However, it is clear from these letters that Ike’s friends from home—Art Hurd, Charley Case, Frances Curry, Charles Harger, and others—played a significant role in helping the general cope with his staggering responsibilities. The letters reveal a man who identified warmly with his small midwestern hometown and its people, who cared about the lives and travails of its citizens. Moreover, he counted on them to listen to his problems, to let him write of his frustrations, to visit his mother, understand his predicaments, and even provide some adulation. Finally, based on this correspondence, there could be no doubt that Abilene supported the war and appreciated his efforts, and that this too would have made long nights and lonely decisions more bearable. 

79. Ibid.; Charley Case to Dwight Eisenhower, March 16, 1945, *ibid.* Civil War general William T. Sherman reportedly said “War is hell.”

80. Dwight Eisenhower to Charley Harger, March 29, 1945, *ibid.*

81. Dwight Eisenhower to Charley Case, June 9, 1945, *ibid.*

82. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President*, 413.