



OMAR BRADLEY

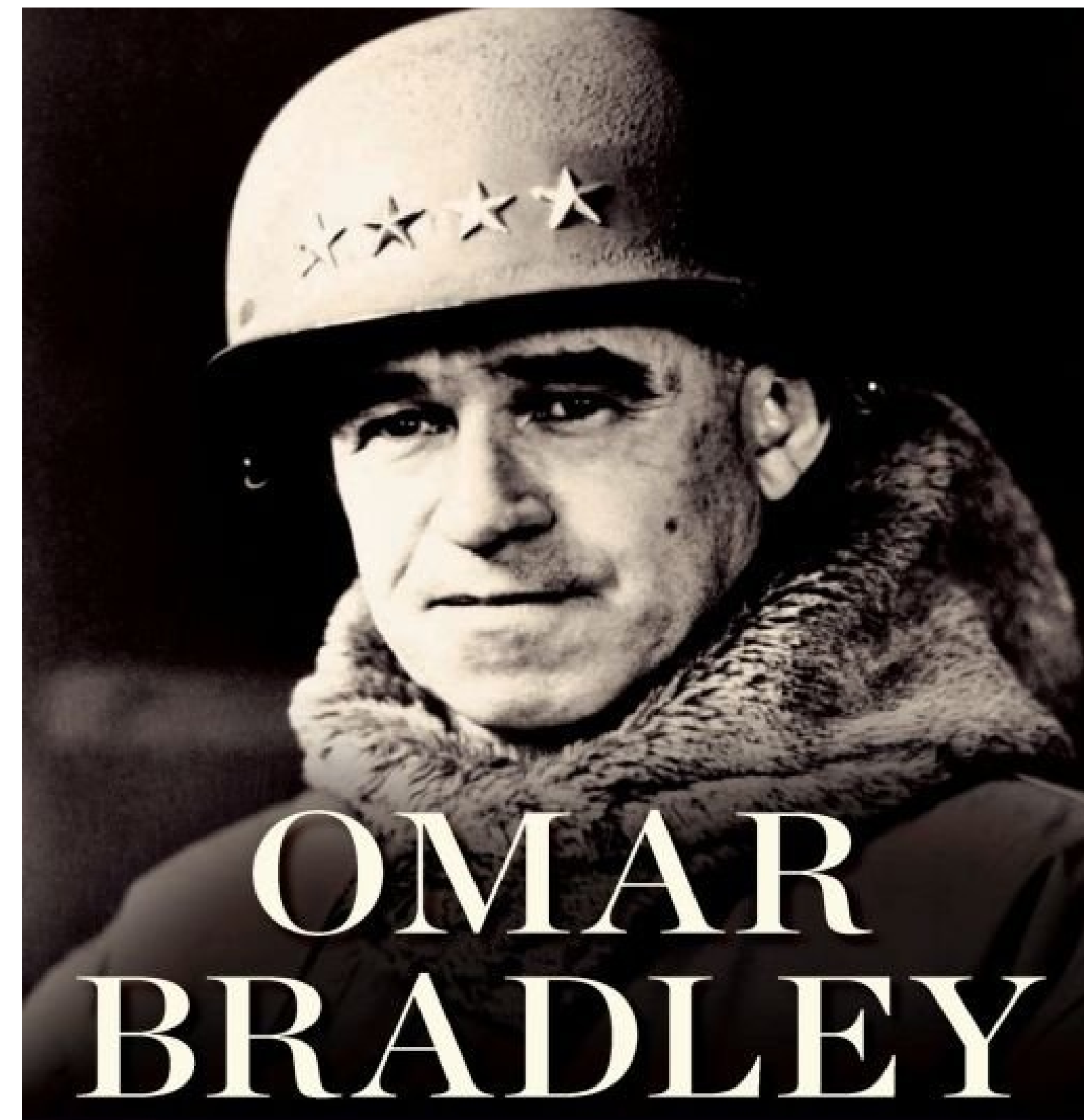


GENERAL AT WAR



Jim DeFelice

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *RANGERS AT DIEPPE*



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To all the quiet heroes following in Bradley's footsteps

INTRODUCTION

First Impressions

Northern Africa, February 23, 1943

The C-54 Skymaster ducked down from the clouds, its Pratt & Whitney radials pulling it toward the long, tan dagger jutting into the azure ocean ahead.

Africa.

As the plane dropped lower, green blotches appeared: trees spared the fury of the working bulldozers that razed the nearby land, turning it burnt yellow even as the aircraft dropped. A short, precariously narrow gray line appeared in the same place ahead. Ants were running near it.

Not ants, but men. Not a line, but a runway—unfinished. The men were laying steel planks to widen and extend it.

General Omar Bradley, stiff and tired from a flight that had begun the night before in Brazil, roused himself and gazed out the window.

“We’re landing, sir,” said Chet Hansen, one of the general’s two aides.

Bradley nodded. Taciturn, he continued to gaze out the window as the military transport bumped onto the steel grid, its wheels whining. A gust pushed the aircraft hard to the side as it landed; the Air Corps pilot mastered it, keeping the drab green airliner on the runway as he feathered the engines and went hard on the brakes. The short strip gave him little room for error.

The same might be said for the tens of thousands of Americans stretched out between the airport and the far-flung foothills of Tunisia well to the east. Three months before, the troops had landed in North Africa, full of hope and vigor, sure that they would bring the war against the Axis to a quick and victorious conclusion. Now they weren’t so sure. Their offensive had stalled badly. The reality of war had proven considerably more frightening than most had thought possible. Facing experienced German veterans, they had stumbled badly. Indeed, things were worse than most realized, as they had benefited from a good portion of luck at the start of the campaign, unnoticed as it may have been.

Luck had run out in a pass far to the east in Tunisia. There the young American force had been severely whipped in a mountainous area known as Kasserine Pass. At roughly the same time the C-54 was setting down, the architect of their defeat was repositioning his Panzers, threatening a strike that would break the young force entirely.

Bradley rose from his seat and made his way to the door with a mixture of anticipation, energy, and undoubtedly some apprehension. Though he was a general, he’d never been this close to war before. Though he was regarded as a master tactician—and had instructed thousands in the art—his plans had never

been put to the test of real combat. And though he was held in the highest esteem by men who had already proven themselves under fire, he himself had never heard an angry bullet crease the air nearby. At fifty, he was a virgin to combat.

This would not have mattered much if he was coming to take a staff job, or even if he intended only to fulfill the role of an observer, in theory the job he had been assigned. But Omar Nelson Bradley, while modest in speech and demeanor, had ambitions that extended beyond the job of advisor or assistant. He wanted desperately to lead men into battle. He wanted to win, and he wanted to kill.

Nor had the man who sent him across the Atlantic intended that he merely observe. U.S. Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall, who'd known Bradley for years, believed he could help turn the faltering U.S. Army around. Originally opposed to the African campaign, Marshall had come to see it as a crucial test for the still inexperienced Army. It was a test that it had to pass, or it would suffer the most dire consequences.



Most Americans, if they've heard of Omar Bradley at all, know him from the 1970 movie Patton. Played by Karl Malden, Bradley there is a middle-aged bespectacled milquetoast who couldn't organize a pickup softball game on his own. Disappearing into the woodwork whenever any real fighting needs to be done, Malden is the anti-Patton, a slouch-shouldered mouse incapable of roaring.

Ironically, Bradley—well into his seventies at that point—is credited as consultant on the movie. Parts of his memoir, *A Soldier's Story*, formed the basis for the screenplay, which does track the historical events relatively accurately. Indeed, the screenplay itself casts Bradley in a fairly favorable, if clearly supporting, role. But anyone watching the movie can't be blamed if they end up wondering how exactly Omar Bradley came to lead the largest American military force ever assembled.

No one expects a movie to accurately portray history, but Bradley has fared just as poorly in many allegedly accurate histories as well. Called everything from a conservative infantryman to an unimaginative plodder, his designs for the war have been lost in a raft of misconceptions. His personality has been distorted until he appears the exact reverse of who he really was. His achievements have been handed to others, his failures magnified out of all proportion.

But perhaps the worst thing is that he has been forgotten or miscast even by serious historians. Bradley, even more than Eisenhower, the architect of the American victory in Europe, rarely appears in more than a cameo in many accounts focused on the campaign.

There are a number of reasons for this, but the most important is Bradley himself. He was, in a word, undramatic. And that has always been out of fashion in America.

By all accounts, Bradley was a man of moderate behavior, a mature leader who

thought before he spoke, who risked his life but didn't call attention to it. He allowed his subordinates to take credit and glory. When he disagreed with his superiors, he did so discreetly. He dressed for the field, and looked it. He lived, for much of the war, in a truck.

Based on the testimony of his peers, Bradley was one of the great tacticians of the war, praised by everyone from paratroop commander James Gavin to Supreme Commander Dwight Eisenhower. But his real asset was his ability to get results from his commanders—he was as much an enabler as a creator of success. The keys to this were his intelligence, his humanity, and most of all his ability to keep his ego largely in check—a rare quality in a general of any rank, let alone one who ended his career with five stars.

That quality sprang directly from Bradley's character, forged in turn-of-the-century Midwestern America. Bradley was, first and last, a believer in values that even during the War, would have been cynically termed "small-town"—self-reliance, respect for others, humility. He was the product of an America that had only recently conquered the frontier, an America where brain and brawn fit together naturally. It was a time when being an athlete brought more responsibilities, not less, a place where a man hunted for food and worked out math problems for fun, an America where calling attention to one's achievements cheapened them irrevocably.

When so much of our perception of history depends on drama and flash, is there room for a man who personified quiet competence?

Yes. For beyond the flash and drama of the moment, the real achievements of the war depended on men like Bradley. And still do.

The irony is that Bradley's war years were full of drama and flash; they've just never been written about. He barely escaped death several times and was a every battle dramatized in the movie Patton—closer, often, to the bullets than the movie's hero. If Bradley hadn't been a general, he would have been a virtual Zelig (or, to use a character from military literature, a Private Yankee Doodle), on hand for every major land conflict in the European Theater of the war. Few men experienced as much of the war as Bradley.

Bradley is more typical of his generation than either Patton or Eisenhower, generals who receive many times as much ink in the history books. Though the nickname "the G.I. General" was a bit of a misnomer—most GIs were not professional soldiers, officers, or infantrymen—he was at least spiritually closer to them than most of the so-called "brass" of the war. The vast majority of GIs who fought in World War II never considered themselves heroes. For them, heroism, sacrifice, and perseverance under fire was just doing their job. They liberated the world and created the American Century. Omar Bradley, unsung and humble, was one of them.



To understand America in World War II, one has to know Omar Bradley. There should be many biographies of him. He should appear more prominently in general histories. His decisions should be more carefully analyzed in the context in which they were made, not used as a straw man for feel-good pronouncements that ultimately avoid the harsh realities of war.

I was amazed some years ago to find that Bradley had never been the subject of an in-depth biography. Gradually I came to believe that the lack of that kind of study was not only an indication of how far he had slipped from public memory but also a cause of it. His memoirs, especially *A Soldier's Story*, tell his story well. But an impartial, easily accessible summary and evaluation of his life has been missing, until now.

My aim here is to tell Bradley's story: focusing on World War II, setting right some of the misperceptions, and showing how it is impossible to understand America's victory in Europe without understanding Omar Bradley. And so, we start at the beginning...

CHAPTER 1

Preparing a General

Omar squinted through the trees, watching for movement. The young boy could hear the squirrel's chatter and the click of its nails against the hard bark of the surrounding trees, but he couldn't see the critter.

He moved forward slowly, trying not to step on the dried leaves. The squirrels in the Missouri woods near his house were wary creatures, used to dealing with hunters far more formidable than a boy barely old enough to read. Most local farmers hunted regularly to supplement their crops, and squirrels were an important source of meat.

Something moved in the branches ahead. The boy froze and squinted. It was just the wind, rustling the leaves.

He stepped again. Something near the top of the tree ducked to the right. The squirrel! It disappeared around the trunk of the tree.

Omar looked over to his father, a few yards away. His dad nodded, then began moving to his right, gingerly slipping through the nearby trees. The boy raised his rifle.

A pair of hunters had a much easier time against the small prey if they worked together. In this case, the tactics were simple but effective. One would wait facing the tree, while the other circled around, in effect flanking the enemy. Drawing closer, the hunter at the rear would make just enough noise for the squirrel to spot him. The animal would seek cover, moving around the tree—and square into the sights of the first hunter.

It was an old tactic, but one that required a fair amount of skill. One had to be stealthy and patient, calm at the moment of attack, and capable of analyzing the tactical situation—flanking your prey too close to another tree or too high in the canopy was a waste of time.

Marksmanship was key. Even at the comparatively close distance of ten or twenty yards, hitting a target as small as a squirrel with an iron-sighted rifle was not an easy task.

Omar steadied the single-shot Stevens and fired. The .22 caliber bullet whistled past the animal, a clean miss.

The squirrel, either petrified or oblivious, didn't move. Omar reloaded calmly, cocked, fired.

Another miss.

His hands flew across the rifle. He aimed, sure of a dead-on shot this time. His finger squeezed at the trigger. The bullet jumped from the gun. His body absorbed the shock of the rifle. It was a true shot, following the mark precisely.

But once more, the bullet sailed off into oblivion. The squirrel sniffed the air. ~~Danger might be nearby, but this spot seemed safe enough.~~ Dejected, Omar looked to his father.

His father motioned for the rifle. Quietly, he adjusted both sights, putting them into line with the barrel. Then he took the weapon and lifted it to his shoulder.

“If I don’t knock his eye out,” Omar’s father said, “something is very wrong with the sights.”

The sharp ping of a rifle shot creased the air. The squirrel—shot through the eye—fell dead to the ground.

Embarrassed by his misses, Omar would long remember that day: sight your weapon properly before you set out. Success depends on attending to all details, small and large, before battle.¹



Omar Nelson Bradley often went hunting with his dad on the family’s sodbustle farm in Randolph County, Missouri, not far from the three-room log house where he was born on February 12, 1893. His mother, Sarah Elizabeth “Bessie” Hubbard, had been born in the same small house seventeen years earlier. His father, John Bradley, had met Bessie while working as a teacher at the local school. When they married, he was twenty-five; she was sixteen.

Their son’s unusual first name was a tribute to Omar D. Gray, a newspaper editor. His second name was that of a local doctor. Unfortunately, Omar seems not to have known why his parents chose those names. One was a man of letters, the other a man of science. Both were prominent in the community, and would have seemed good models for the boy to emulate. Speculating further, the newspaper editor’s politics—a prominent part of his trade at the time—seem to have celebrated the common man against the big Eastern interests. John’s decision to give the editor’s name to his son was as much a statement of values as it was a way to make him unique.

Described in Bradley’s autobiography, *A General’s Life*, as “a crude three-room log house,”² the Hubbard family home was probably a little older than many of the houses in the area, but its size was fairly typical. Much of Missouri was still sparsely settled, with forty-square-acre family farms dominating the irregular landscape. Clark County’s roots extended to the early decades of the nineteenth century. Many early settlers were from the South. Regional and family ties as well as politics played a strong role there during the Civil War, when many local citizens, including Bradley’s paternal grandfather, enlisted in the Confederate army. But local loyalties were divided—Bradley’s maternal grandfather had served in the Union.

Still, no matter their individual histories, the families had much in common. As the opening lines of *A General’s Life* put it, they were “plain Missouri farmers proud, honest, hardworking and poor. Desperately poor.”³

The U.S. Census counted 24,803 people in Randolph in 1890, and 24,442 in 1900. They were spread out. The population in Clark, the closest town to the Hubbard homestead, was counted at 194. Moberly, an important railroad depot and the largest city in the area, had some 8,209 residents. The area was growing—Moberly had increased by about a third from its 1880 population. Still, there were fewer than five thousand homes and only some six thousand families living in the entire county just prior to Omar Bradley's birth.⁴

Raised in a family of farmers and mostly self-taught, Omar's father had a yen for learning, but it wasn't until he was nineteen years old that he began attending school for the first time. Two years later, he became a teacher himself. Like his son, he seems to have possessed a gift for math. He also loved reading and valued books. When he started teaching at a new school, John Bradley would often ask local leaders and businessmen to help him raise funds to buy books and start a library. Years later, Omar remembered fund-raisers like ice cream socials where the money was raised a few cents at a time.⁵

Love of learning aside, almost certainly one of John Bradley's main qualifications as a young teacher would have been his ability to keep order. Athletic, he was more than a match for the rambunctious teenagers who would run over other instructors.

While the local school district was centered around Higbee, it spread out over a considerable distance. There were nearly a dozen schools. These were the famous one-room schoolhouses, where teachers grouped their students by age and ability, conducting lessons on everything from the alphabet to great literature. While the upper bounds were obviously set by the teacher's own education and background, most students would find their limits more quickly, their attendance constrained by the family's need to make a living on the prairie.

The teachers were not well paid. John never made more than forty dollars a month from his teaching, though the district did supply housing for his family. He supplemented his income by laboring on local farms during the summer. The family occasionally took in boarders as well.

At least in her son's eyes, Omar's mother Bessie was the archetypal frontier woman, the sort of resourceful person who built the Midwest. Her household garden supplied much of the family food; her baking was essential to the family meals. She sewed all her own clothes with a Singer sewing machine. Eventually she used those sewing skills to support the family as well. She's described in *General's Life* as "blue-eyed, strong-minded and entirely gray-haired before she was twenty ... an unfailingly cheerful and resourceful woman. She was a strict and attentive, though far from doting, mother."⁶

Bessie came from a tight-knit family that remained close through difficult times. When her older sister, Emma Jane Bogie, died in 1897, Bessie's mother helped her son-in-law care for their two young daughters, Nettie and Opal. When she died a few months later, the Bradleys took in the girls, ages seven and six, making the three and a half-year-old Omar an instant baby brother. Omar himself had a baby brother, Raymond Calvert, born in February 1900. But the child died shortly of his second birthday in January 1902, the victim of scarlet fever.

A photo taken of the family when Omar was six years old reveals John as a solid, well-built man of barely average height with a moustache and buttoned suit, posing with one hand on his son in front of him. Omar's mother, in a black dress, stands off to their right, a visible gap between the others.⁷ It's a very formal family photo, and Bessie is the only one near smiling.

Father and son formed a tight bond during Omar's early years. They would walk to school together at what must have seemed like a quick pace for the young child, although almost a dawdling one for his father: seventeen minutes a mile. The walks gave them time to discuss many things: hunting, books, and baseball—the sport a particular passion of John's. At night, the cold house meant that father and son often shared a bed for warmth. John would quiz Omar on math problems, honing an innate ability with numbers and reinforcing Omar's inclination to logic.

The Bradleys attended the Church of Christ, a born-again Christian church that John had been raised in. (Bessie, originally a Baptist, joined after marriage.) Outside of services, the family had few formal observances of religion; they neither said Grace at the table nor read much from the Bible. Nonetheless, Omar remembered them as having deeply held Christian convictions, living a "Christian life in every sense of the phrase."⁸



Baseball had a strong influence on Omar. John Bradley enjoyed the sport, which was gaining enormous popularity at the time. Omar spent many summer afternoons in the pastures playing ball. His cousin, whom Clay Blair interviewed years later for *A General's Life*, remembered that as Omar got older, he could throw a ball three hundred feet, or roughly the distance from home plate to the right field wall in a modern stadium—an impressive toss, even for today's professionals.

Indoors, Bradley played toy soldiers, creating forts and mock battles using the .22 caliber shells for men and dominos for walls and barriers. Cannons were fashioned from a pea shooter to support the troops. The childhood battles were fantasized replays of the Revolutionary War, with the British generally taking it on the chin.

But play was generally a small part of Omar's day, even when school was out of session. His first chores included gathering kindling each morning for the stove and fetching water from the well out back. Later, he helped with farm chores and some of the odd jobs John Bradley did to earn money.⁹ Omar helped his father gather honey (some seventy years later he still remembered the stings). Father and son would also dig yellow root or goldenseal, a common ingredient in medicine at the time. While he considered hunting recreation, he would regularly take his rabbit pelts and sell them, earning more money for ammo. He was a good shot; among the stories Bradley later told was one about nailing eggs tossed in the air¹⁰ while shooting from the hip.

John's shifting school assignments meant that Omar attended a variety of grammar schools, at least four by the time he reached sixth grade, according to the family records. Educationally, this probably wasn't very disrupting—he had the same teacher, after all. But it did mean a different set of friends during these early days, and may have tightened his relationship with his father.

When he was twelve, the family moved to Higbee, buying a house there. This allowed Bradley to attend the school there, probably with the idea that it would prepare him for college. The house they bought, purchased at a sheriff's auction, cost \$515. The \$450 mortgage strained family finances to the point that Mr. Bradley took a job as a telephone operator to earn extra money. A switchboard was installed in one of the bedrooms, and Omar and his two cousins took turns at it each night, handling the odd overnight call. Omar's father, meanwhile, continued to teach at the rural schools, walking about seven miles every day.

Higbee was not a one-room schoolhouse town. Students attended class by grade level. By age, Omar was a seventh grader, but tests showed he was more advanced, and he was placed with the eighth graders for the 1905–06 school year. By the end of the year, Omar was ranked first among the twenty-two boys and girls in his grade. The next year—considered the “sophomore year” at the school—there were only twelve students. Omar thrived, finishing with a grade point average of 98.66.



One evening toward the end of January 1908, John Bradley came home late from work, exhausted by his six-mile trek. That was unusual; even in the winter, exercise seemed to agree with him. Worn down and coughing from what seemed to be a very bad cold, he went to bed.

It turned out he had a fever. There was a good deal of illness going around town, and John's condition didn't seem particularly bad; he was a healthy man in good physical shape. But the doctor found that his lungs had begun filling with fluid. Within days, pneumonia killed him. He was forty.^{[11](#)}

Omar was too sick to go to the funeral. His father's sudden death shook the small community. There was standing room only at the funeral. “No matter how hard they had tried to suppress their emotions,” wrote the Higbee Weekly News, “the strongest among the large crowd turned from the casket with tears in the eyes. To die universally regretted is a privilege accorded but few.”^{[12](#)}



Omar, just entering his teen years, had lost not only a father and role model, but also a teacher, hunting companion, and probably his closest friend. H

remembered that winter—one of the warmest on record in that part of the state—as the coldest ever.

The family could no longer afford the mortgage on the house, so his mother rented it out (it was later sold at a sheriff's auction), and they moved to Moberly. Moberly, Missouri, was a railroad town, relatively new and "big"—if a population just under nine thousand can be considered big. It was certainly larger than Higbee, and it provided more opportunities for work. Bessie worked as a seamstress and rented out rooms in their leased house.

Omar added some money by taking a paper route, but school was his primary concern. At Moberly High School, he was assigned to the tenth grade, repeating the grade he had last completed at Higbee. The next year, in the fall of 1909, the school officials decided he had been left back unfairly and jumped him ahead to the senior class.¹³

Whatever the effect on his studies, the arbitrary promotion helped Omar in one sense: it put him in the same class with his neighbor, Mary Quayle. He slowly developed a crush, although they never actually dated. Bradley said later that he was too busy with his paper route and sports, but his innate shyness around girls and women was certainly a much bigger factor. Still, he got to know the Quayle family quite well. They attended the same church, and he took Sunday school lessons from Mary's mother Eudora. The friendship would eventually blossom into a romance.

By now, Bradley was a self-described "baseball nut." His skills made it easy for him to make friends on the baseball diamond. The school did not have an organized team, but the students made their own arrangements, and Bradley, with his tall, sinewy frame was a popular player. Away from the field, he seems to have felt he was something of an outsider, not really fitting in with young people who had known each other from early youth. The pressure of his family finances might have been another factor. He spent the summer of 1909 working in the supply department of Wabash Railroad.

In the late winter of 1910, Omar and another boy collided while skating one night on the local lake. They came together so fast and hard that Bradley's teeth were damaged. The hard-pressed family couldn't afford medical attention. Already shy, he became self-conscious about how he looked, pressing his lips together whenever he was photographed. It was a habit that stayed with him for the rest of his life, as he remained painfully self-conscious when his photo was being taken—even when, paradoxically, he demonstrated little care for how he looked otherwise.

That summer, Omar went back to his old job at the railroad. He got a quick promotion, becoming a helper in the mechanical division working on the steam engines. Paid seventeen cents an hour, he worked six days a week. That was about half the average pay for all railroad workers in America, but not a bad wage considering his experience.¹⁴ The position was exactly the sort that a young man with ambitions might start in.

But Omar wasn't planning a career with the railroad. He was saving money for college. He had decided to become a lawyer, and planned to attend the University

of Missouri in Columbia. Any worries he had about not being able to support his mother once he left for college were somewhat alleviated when Bessie married a local widower, John Robert Maddox, on Christmas Day 1910, even though Maddox himself was poor and raising two young sons.



At some point that spring or early summer, Bradley chanced to strike up a conversation with John Cruson, who ran the Sunday school at his church. Cruson liked the seventeen-year-old. There was much to like: athletic and intelligent. Omar was hard-working and conscientious.

Cruson asked Omar about his future plans. Omar told him he was saving money to attend the University of Missouri in the fall.

“Why don’t you try for West Point?”

“I couldn’t afford West Point.”¹⁵

Cruson smiled and told him that West Point didn’t charge tuition. Rather, it paid its students—in exchange, of course, for their committing to serve in the U.S. Army as commissioned officers.

Bradley told this story throughout his life, making it sound as if his interest in West Point was primarily financial: it was a free way to get a college education. But that seems far too simplistic. For one thing, while he may have been somewhat uninformed about West Point that he believed he had to pay tuition, he would certainly have found out a great deal about the school by the time he decided to apply. The Army was an institution unto itself, not joined lightly. Whether he saw it as a pathway to becoming an engineer—a guess, but a likely one given the school’s reputation—it still represented a major switch in direction, one that a contemplative person like Bradley would have considered with some seriousness.

The admission process to the Point was formidable, and Bradley faced another obstacle—his mother didn’t think it was a good idea. But talking about it with her apparently convinced him to go ahead and apply. He wrote a letter to his congressman, William M. Rucker, seeking an appointment to the school. Rucker had already made his allotted appointment that year, however, and told Omar he would have to wait another year before applying.

Too long, thought Omar. He was about to drop the idea when the law on appointments was changed, giving the congressman another nomination. There was another young man ahead of Bradley, but Rucker offered him a chance to take the exams anyway; this would allow him to become an alternate in case the other boy failed the tests. Omar had eight days to decide—which meant, if he said yes, he had eight days to study.

The decision almost came down to money: Omar didn’t want to spend the money on a train ticket “with the odds stacked so heavily against”¹⁶ him. He sought out C. Lilly, the local superintendent of schools, to ask for his advice. Lilly told him to take his shot. Even if he failed, it would be good experience.

And yet Bradley still couldn't bring himself to spend the money. He decided he would take the test if—and only if—the railroad would “give me time off and a free pass to St. Louis.”¹⁷ The railroad did both.



The qualifying exams stretched over four days. The stumper for Bradley was not English, a subject he'd always had trouble with in school, but rather algebra, the subject he'd always done best in.

His mind seemed to go blank reading the problems. It had been two years since he last studied the subject in school. He had trouble with calculations, couldn't remember formulas. It was a disaster.

Despairing two hours into the four-hour test, he gave up. Omar rose from his desk and walked toward the proctor. But the officer was reading a book, and was so engrossed in it that he failed to notice Bradley—or perhaps he just decided to ignore him, silently urging the would-be recruit to take another shot.

Bradley decided he wouldn't disturb him and went back to his desk. Somehow equations materialized from the fog of his memory, and Bradley was able to do enough of the exam to pass, though by his recollection just barely.

The congressman's first choice, who had been studying for a year, did not. Bradley was offered the appointment.

“I felt a twinge of guilt about Dempsey Anderson [the other candidate, whom he had met while taking the tests], as though I had taken away something that was his,” Bradley says in *A General's Life*. “I offered to decline the appointment, thinking he might somehow regain it, but he said, ‘Indeed not. You have won.’”¹⁸

Here was a decision, literally the most important he had made in his life up to that point, and Bradley was ready to give up the place he had earned through difficult competition. The moment illustrates a deep facet of his character—something more than altruism or just a sensitivity to other's feelings. Even as a teenager, he seemed to have a well-developed sense of universal justice: it wasn't fair that a usurper took someone else's “position,” even if he was the usurper.

An undertone of bemusement and even wonder comes through when this story is told in *A General's Life*. One might be tempted to credit his co-writer, but it is present in his interviews and other source material as well. Bradley comes off as unassuming because he was unassuming. Given that the bulk of the interviews and stories came after he was a five-star general, it's an even more remarkable character trait.



West Point is located on the western bank of the Hudson River in New York

about sixty miles north of New York City. Overlooking a strategic spot where the waterway forms an elbow bending to the west, a garrison there that lay above the river was one of several important camps George Washington used to house troops during the latter stages of the Revolutionary War. Most infamously, the fort was commanded by General Benedict Arnold when he decided to desert to the British.

West Point remained a garrison and training area after the war, and in 1808 became the site of the U.S. Military Academy, the Army's premier training school for young officers. Throughout much of the Academy's history, it was known for turning out engineering students, and is often cited as the role model for engineering colleges throughout the U.S. Among its many famous graduates was George Washington Goethals, the engineer responsible for the Panama Canal.

When Bradley arrived in 1911, the Point and the Army were in the middle of a boom. Following the Spanish-American War and action in the Philippines, the U.S. Army had a shortage of trained officers, and Congress authorized the expansion of the classes. Bradley was one of the beneficiaries of this expansion.

The Army itself was relatively small, with roughly 133,000 soldiers. The recent wars notwithstanding, it was still very much a frontier force. Economically, the country was growing rapidly, but America was not a world power in a military sense. Its standing army and navy paled compared to those of Europe, and would continue to do so even after World War I. This was a reflection of many deeply held American attitudes, beginning with George Washington's famous admonition not to become involved in "foreign entanglements." Thanks partly to geography, there were no great threats facing the country that demanded a large military. Nor could the country have supported one easily. Federal budgets were financed primarily by excise taxes and tariffs through the nineteenth century. The unpredictable nature of these taxes and the difficulty of collecting large amounts through them kept government spending low. And that, in turn, meant a very small standing army and navy.

Bradley was joining a fairly small club, and he was joining as one of its elite. Despite his background, there would be no obstacles to his advancement up the ranks if he worked hard and proved himself. And if he chose to leave the Army, he would have a reasonably good education for civilian life.

Bradley's graduating class of 1915 would prove to be an exceptional one, producing a large number of generals, including two (Bradley and Dwight D. Eisenhower) who became five-star generals. Of the 164 graduates, 59 became generals, a rate that is said to be the highest of any class to graduate the Academy. Its success set the class apart, and it became known and celebrated as "The Class the Stars Fell On."¹⁹

It can be argued that to some extent, the class's achievements were a result of a peculiar set of circumstances—the men who graduated as young lieutenants had the benefit of serving during an expansionary era for the Army, and found themselves in the middle of a war at exactly the age and experience level when colonels were promoted to generals. In that sense, they were in the right place at the right time, however ironic it may be to use that phrase to describe a war. O

the other hand, their achievements would prove to be outsized, the individual records attesting to their unusual abilities.

Bradley's grades on the entrance exam were good enough to get him into the school, but they were far from the best in his class. The 265 men were divided into 28 divisions according to those scores. Bradley started at 24 in math, his best subject; he was in division 27 in English and history. But that was largely the product of his preparation for the exam. Bradley finished his first year ranked forty-ninth in his class, eventually graduating at forty-fourth.

Bradley's late appointment meant he missed the actual start of the term, which began in June with a seven-week "summer camp." During that time, new cadets—called "plebes" their first year—lived in tents on the grounds and received a kind of basic introduction to military life and skills. Hiking and shooting were at the core of these skills, and the boy who'd learned to hunt at age four excelled at them. Thus Bradley missed out on an early opportunity to set himself apart as a class leader.

He also missed the West Point tradition of "beast barracks"—the difficult ritual that involved merciless hazing of the newcomers by upperclassmen. The hazing at the time was quite cruel, even inhumane, and in fact continued well after beast barracks. But if Bradley was singled out for particular attention during his first year he never complained. He thought hazing (called "crawling" at the time) was a great "leveler," removing preconceived notions of merit and replacing them with military discipline and a recognition of the command structure and privilege of rank.

His status as a late-comer earned him and the others the title of an "Augustine," a play on words referring to the month they started. Bradley felt that the Augustines were discriminated against, with not one promoted to cadet officer until their senior year.²⁰

Bradley won respect among his classmates for his athletic ability. Not long after he arrived, the Army baseball coach, Sam Strang Nicklin, watched the long, lean plebe play in an intramural game. Bradley hit a home run and made several good throws to the plate from the outfield. The coach made a point to look him up after the game, complimenting him on his throwing arm. The following spring, Omar tried out for the baseball team. He didn't make the first team—that would have been unusual for a freshman—but he was added to the squad nonetheless. Being on the baseball team removed some of the restrictions normally placed on plebes. Omar was allowed to sit at a team table, mix with upperclassmen on the team, and avoid a good deal of hazing while on the fields. He was popular enough to be inducted into an illegal Greek fraternity.

The following year, Omar became the team's starting left fielder. He was a good player on a good team. Not only did Army have a winning season—16-6—but they beat Navy 2-1 in a celebrated contest.

Bradley lettered as the starting left fielder on a pair of excellent teams in his final two years. Characteristically, he calls the 1914 squad's record "middling," when it was actually 10-5, a winning percentage professional teams would kill for. In his final year, the record was even better, 18-3.

Bradley also played football, starting with the jayvee squad in his second year. He made varsity as a backup center the next, and played in a handful of games throughout the rest of his school career. The teams were outstanding, but most important for an Army man, they all beat Navy. Bradley hurt his knee playing however, and the injury would plague him on and off for the rest of his life.

Bradley came to West Point a hair shy of six feet tall, skinny, and weighing 140 pounds. He said he gained more than thirty pounds by his second year. Even then he was more rangy than heavy. As his sinewy frame filled out, his strength, endurance, and energy became obvious. Someone nicknamed him “Darwin” allegedly because he looked like an ape.²¹ The nickname didn’t quite stick; “Bradley” did.

One other physical characteristic deserves note: Bradley’s hair was already graying during his college years, a trait he inherited from his mother.

In his military courses, Bradley discovered that he had a knack for small-team tactics, or what might be called the science of the battlefield—examining and analyzing positions and forces. Bradley joined a small group of cadets in an informal seminar on tactics led by a lieutenant, Forrest Harding. Conducted a night after regular classes, the sessions provided some of the most important professional preparation Bradley received at the Point.



It was at West Point that Bradley first met Dwight Eisenhower. Not only were they both members of the same class, but as athletes they were both members of Company F, Bradley joining in his second year. Eisenhower would probably have been a star running back had he not injured his knee during his plebe year; he consoled himself with cheerleading. At the same time, he earned something of a reputation as a rebel.

Though the two young men were friends, they were not extraordinarily close. Their personalities were very different: Eisenhower liked to talk; Bradley was hardly loquacious. More to the point, Bradley tended to follow the Point’s rules where “Ike” often flouted all but one: honesty.

In a class of 164 graduates, everyone knew each other fairly well, and by 1915 Eisenhower had taken Bradley’s measure. Editing the yearbook in their final year, Eisenhower chose a quote for Bradley’s entry:

“True merit is like a river; the deeper it is, the less noise it makes.” And he suggested, “If [Bradley] keeps up the clip he’s started, some of us will some day be bragging to our grandchildren that, ‘Sure, General Bradley was a classmate of mine.’”²²



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