

REFERENCE PAPERS

INFORMATION DIVISION

DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

OTTAWA - CANADA

No. 90

Extracts from Newspaper Articles

on

MAJOR GENERAL E.L.M. BURNS,
DSO, OBE, MC.

Biographical Notes --

Born - Montreal, June 17, 1897

Served in World Wars I and II, and in latter commanded First Canadian Corps in Italian campaign. Joined Department of Veterans Affairs, Ottawa, 1945. Deputy Minister - 1950. Appointed U.N. Truce Supervisor in Palestine, Aug. 3, 1954. Appointed to command United Nations Emergency Force, November, 1956.

CANADA's Maj.-Gen. Eedson Louis Millard Burns wears an habitually grim expression for which no one blames him. He has what is frequently described as "the most difficult job in the world today". On behalf of the United Nations he supervises the explosive truce between Israel and the Arab States which has existed since their war was stopped in 1949.

It is a job that no one less dedicated to the ideals of the United Nations could possibly want. To Arabs and Jews he presents a picture of a stern, composed man, ready to listen to both sides of a question, but uncompromising in his intention to uphold the principles of the United Nations.

His staff know that the composure is sometimes skin deep. After a particularly trying session with Arab and Jewish delegates they have heard him, alone in his office, impartially calling down a plague on both their houses in fiery terms.

At the sound of a shot he will drop what he is doing and drive to Kalandiya airport in Jordan, board his DC-4, rented from the U.S. Air Force, and fly to Amman, Gaza, Cairo, Beirut or Damascus, wherever the centre of the crisis-of-the-moment may be.

Until recently Burns made his flights in the discomfort of a side-facing bucket seat. Then his crew, unasked, managed to scrounge and install two forward-facing airliner seats. His American pilot, Capt. Ray Randt, says:

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"I've flown lots of generals but this one's the best yet. No fuss and no complaints despite some pretty rugged flights. But we know when to keep our mouths shut after he's had one of those tough conferences."

Burns has always been a glutton for work. At the end of World War I he was 21, the youngest staff captain in the Canadian Expeditionary Force and holder of the Military Cross.

When he first arrived at U.N. headquarters in Jerusalem Canadian officers on his staff automatically called him "Smiler", though never in his presence, until a sharp comment one day made them realize it was not appreciated.

Not even the most senior officer presumes to call him anything but "sir". They respect him for his energy and ability to make decisions.

Asked why he had taken on such a seemingly thankless task as truce supervisor, he replied simply, "For a long time I had been proclaiming that people should do more for the United Nations. Then Mr. Pearson asked me if I would like to do the job, so there I was faced with my own challenge. I had no expectations of great success. I felt then, as I do now, that as long as things could be kept quiet, without compromising U.N. principles, something would have been achieved."

Every day that he is at his headquarters, Burns drives to Beit Jala, close to Bethlehem, for an Arabic lesson with a medical major in the Arab Legion. When he has the opportunity he practices his Arabic in the local markets. He has not attempted to learn Hebrew because most of his contacts in Israel speak excellent English or French.

In addition to being the "most difficult", Burn's job is frequently one of the loneliest. With his wife and daughter residing in Ottawa, Burns lives alone in a three-room suite in a big white house on the hill overlooking Jerusalem in a neutral zone not much larger than the area of the grounds.

From: GENERAL BURNS IS ALWAYS ON THE SPOT
by - David Willock,
Montreal Star, December 10, 1955.

The castle-like headquarters of the U.N. Palestine Truce Supervision Organization was built out of the white limestone ribs of Judea for the British high commissioners of the Palestine mandate. It is still called Government House.

Although nobody in the Middle East has ever been heard to call him anything but General Burns, the nickname used by his friends in Canada is Tommy. The General got the nickname because he happened to be a boy during the heyday of the great Canadian heavyweight boxer, Tommy Burns.

From: CANADIAN GENERAL FINDS THAT MEDIATOR'S ROLE
IN THE MIDDLE EAST CAN BE A THANKLESS JOB

By - Kennett Love,
Toronto Globe and Mail, November 18, 1955

Except when his fine-drawn temper runs away with him, General Burns is a shy and reticent man, known in the Army as a gifted story-teller, an exceptional pianist, and a man of many and varied interests with an encyclopedic mind.

Music and gardening are his hobbies. He has written some poetry and prose good enough to be published. He learned French as a boy and speaks it with the same fluency as English. He learned to speak German adequately while studying aerial map-making in Germany. His contribution to this phase of military science won him the Order of the British Empire in 1935. He won the Military Cross in World War I.

His has been described as one of the world's most thankless tasks. Supervising the precarious armistice he has no military force at his disposal. Until recently he had won praise from Arabs and Israelis alike for his good counsel, fairness and impartiality, mixed with a sense of humor and friendliness.

From: CANDID CANADIAN
New York Times, - July 31, 1956.

The Chief of the U.N. Commission in Palestine is not an easy man to know. Hundreds of Canadians have met him either in the army or during the postwar period of readjustment. Few of them could honestly say they know him. Quiet, precise and unsmiling, General Burns has never appeared concerned with making a quick or flattering impression. The effect of his personality is like that of gamma rays - unseen, unfelt but potent.

He is no waster of words, which he regards highly and uses well. He possesses an uncanny knack for revealing questions and a gift for direct answer. An Army colleague once described him as "the brain that marches like a soldier," and even in civilian life that has proved to be so.

General Burns has deep set, probing eyes and a firm jaw line. He wears a trim moustache. Together with his quiet capable manner, these make him a formidable man, in or out of uniform.

From: ISRAEL TRUCE FATE RESTS ON CANADIAN
By - Peter Dempson,
Toronto Telegram, - December 2, 1954.

The U.N. Truce Supervisory building is as calm a place as a Canadian country mansion. General Burns works in his shirt sleeves at a large desk in a spacious office once owned by the British mandate government. One wall is covered with maps of Israel. Heavy lines mark the borders, and I got the impression immediately that some heavy lines have formed around General Burns' eyes from watching those borders.

In a slow, pleasant, unmilitary voice General Burns said, "My chief problem here is suspicion. Sometimes I am able to bring the Israelis and the Arabs to agree with me around a conference table. But then next day I read in the paper that the people I have spoken to say that the other side is not really willing to accept my proposals. I don't think that I am fighting a losing battle here. I think that eventually peace will come to this area. But it's going to take a long time and we must be patient. I think that both sides really want to make peace."

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CANADIAN GARDIAN
New York Times - July 11, 1955

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Chief, quiet and unassuming, General Burns has never appeared
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He has no waste of words, which he regards highly
and uses well. He possesses an unusual knack for revealing
just what he has to say in a direct answer. His very colleagues
once described him as "the kind of man who marches like a soldier"
and even in civilian life that man proved to be so.

General Burns has deep-set, probing eyes and a firm
jaw line. He wears a rimless spectacles. Together with his quiet
eccentric manner, these make him a formidable man, in or out of
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ISRAELI TROOP PAUSE RESTS ON CANADIAN
By Peter Demson
Toronto Telegram - December 2, 1955

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