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Glimpses of a Man: The Life of Ralph J. Canine

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Our Agency's first director as remembered by family, friends, and colleagues.

I. THE PRE-NSA YEARS

He was a four-handicap polo player. He played golf avidly and in his later years developed a fondness for gardening, raising over two hundred azaleas in his backyard. One type of azalea is named for him. He had originally planned to become a doctor, but after having served overseas in what was then perceived to be the last great war, World War I, he said that he "had seen enough blood." He chose instead to make the Army his life. His decision proved to be a significant one, both for himself and for us, for, at the age of fifty-seven, he was to become our Agency's first Director.

Still remembered with great fondness and respect today by those who knew him, Ralph J. Canine was born in Flora, Indiana, on 9 November 1895. His father, Edwin, was a superintendent of schools for many years and wrote several books on the educational process. Ralph was the oldest of two children in a very close knit family. His younger sister, Margaret, who, like her father, chose a career in the education field, was to maintain close ties with her brother until the day he died. Summers were spent on the family farm in a small Indiana town where wild raspberry bushes abounded and the Canine children were able to witness the birth of several barnyard litters. The farm remained in the family until after the next generation, Ralph's own children, had spent their share of idyllic country summers there and Margaret was able to perfect her homemade raspberry jelly recipe.

Ralph completed pre-med studies at Northwestern University in 1916 and was commissioned 2d lieutenant of field artillery in the Officers' Reserve Corps, receiving a Regular Army Commission less than two weeks later. Initially assigned to the 8th Field Artillery at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, the following year Ralph Canine joined the waves of fresh young American recruits shipped to France to fight in the Great War. Like many of his contemporaries, he was reluctant to recall many of the details of his World War I experiences. Completing his overseas tour of duty in 1919, he returned to the United States and was next posted to Camp Funston, Kansas, as brigade communications officer. From there he went to Fort Meade, Maryland, where he was named brigade adjutant.

It was at Fort Meade where he met his wife-to-be, Ruth Wiscomb of Salt Lake City, Utah. Ruth was a recent arrival at Ft. Meade, visiting her sister and brother-in-law, the Olsons, and their newborn child. Ralph and Ruth's first meeting was a unique one. Ruth was on a car tour of the post with her sister when she spotted the young Captain astride a magnificent Arabian. From shouting distance, Ralph, who had known the Olsons from previous assignments and had been told of Ruth's expected visit, halted his horse and unceremoniously yelled out to the car's occupants, "Mrs. Olson, when's your sister going to get here? I want to meet her before I go on leave." His query was met with equal informality from the slightly piqued Ruth who stuck her head out the car's front passenger window and yelled back, "I'm already here and you can go anytime." Ralph did go on leave, although he cut short his stay with his family in order to court the intriguing Miss Wiscomb, who, incidentally, was still pinned (engaged to be engaged) to an aspiring law student back home. Within a year, Ruth was unpinned and newly named.

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The couple's first home was Purdue University where Ralph was assigned for two years as assistant professor of military science and tactics. The tour was a happy one for the Canines, as they often acted as chaperons at dances, picnics, and other outings for the university students.

In 1925 they were reassigned to "God's paradise" - the Philippines - so dubbed by Ralph's commanding officer who phoned in the new orders to a mystified Ruth. One month and two typhoons later, the flat-bottomed cattle boat-turned-army transport pulled into berth at Manila Bay. For many of its passengers, disembarkment provided them with their first glimpse of sky in weeks, for most had been stricken with an unrelenting and particularly vicious form of seasickness and had been forced to spend much of their time below decks. A very pregnant Ruth was one of these. Ralph, who had been one of only two diners showing up at the dining parlor for a meal one evening, was not.

For the Canines, the Philippines would prove to be one of their favorite tours. Once adjusted to the mosquito netting over the beds, the infamous wood-devouring white ants which consumed furniture and home indiscriminately, and the earthquakes, Ralph and Ruth settled into life with their new son, Ralph, Jr., who had been born on his father's birthday several months after arriving in the Philippines. The climate was bearable, the native population amiable, and servants plentiful and hardworking. Ruth was especially fond of the late afternoon teas which were held on a daily basis and which involved the donning of good clothes and the visiting of close friends and neighbors.

Two years later, the Canines were once more packing up their belongings - this time for a post already familiar to them, Ft. Sill. There, Ralph served as post exchange officer, a position which he filled with the same organizational drive and determination which had characterized his past positions. It was not long before he had implemented a revolutionary system of post exchange - one that was not only economical to Army personnel and advantageous to merchants, but which also strengthened certain Canine talents which would prove to be invaluable attributes in future jobs. Ralph's merchandising system of obtaining goods for the exchange at wholesale rates was subsequently adopted throughout the Army and served as the foundation for the later Army-Air Force Exchange system. Ft. Sill also saw an addition of another son to the Canine family, Edwin, named after his paternal grandfather.

Then followed what the Canines would come to think of as truly being a tour in God's Paradise - Fort McDowell, Angel Island in San Francisco Bay. From 1931 until 1935 Ralph was camp adjutant in a place where it was not uncommon for deer to come up to the front doors of homes seeking food and where the quail population was immense and bold. One neighbor made quick work of several quails which brazened their way past him through his kitchen door one evening around dinner time, thus rendering the quail population several members less immense. It was to Angel Island that the Canine family hoped to return in their retirement years.

In 1938 Ralph and his family returned to the collegiate environment when Ralph was appointed Assistant Professor of Military Science and Tactics at Ohio State University. There the family remained for three years.

On 7 December 1941 the Canines were stationed at Edgewood Arsenal, Maryland. Ralph received orders to go to Columbia, South Carolina, and it was not long before he was sent overseas as Chief of Staff of the XII Corps. Ralph, Jr., himself now in the Army, was sent to Japan. Ruth, and Edwin, a high schooler, remained in South Carolina until the end of the war.

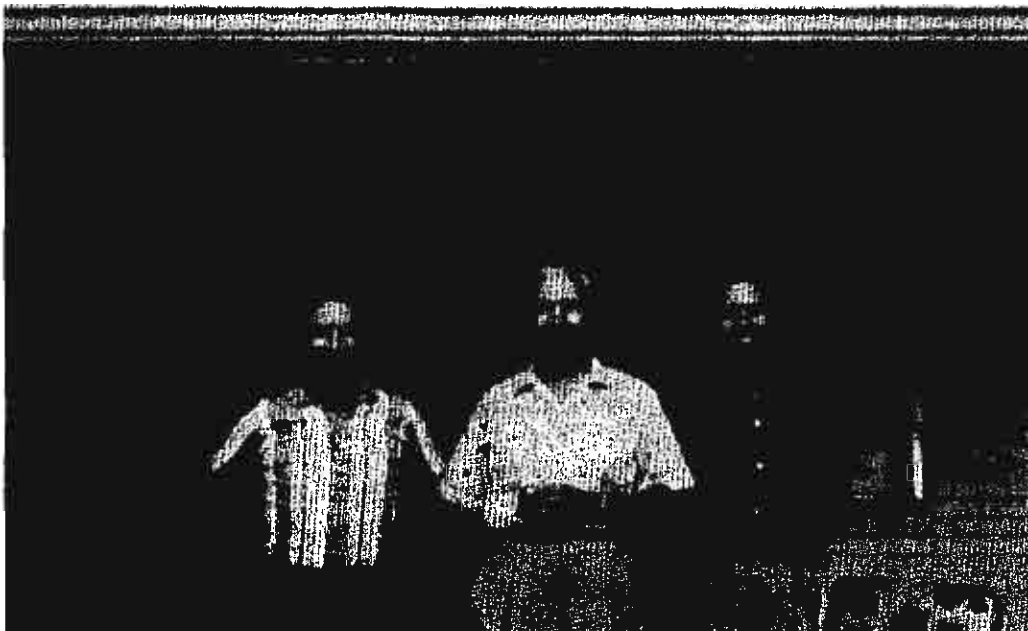
Ralph's part in the Second World War was as new an experience for him as his part in the First World War had been for the young boy from the Midwest. He was older and more knowledgeable in the ways of war, yet many of the things that he saw while serving overseas he kept to himself, much as he had kept to himself his experiences in World

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War I. The XII Corps spearheaded the U.S. Third Army under George Patton and saw action in the Battle of the Bulge, Germany, Normandy, Czechoslovakia, and Luxembourg. Ralph is referred to several times in his capacity of Chief of Staff of the XII Corps in Patton's book, *War As I Knew It*, and it was Patton who pinned Ralph's first star on his epaulet. Ralph received a number of other mementos of his service in the war, including the Legion of Merit and the U.S. Silver Star from the United States government, the Croix de Guerre from both the governments of France and Belgium, and the Medal of Valor from the Soviet Union.

After the war, Ralph was assigned briefly to the Army Ground Forces Headquarters in Washington, D.C., and was then stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where he was made chief of staff with the Replacement and School Command. He returned to Germany in 1947 as artillery commander of the 1st Infantry Division in Europe and in 1949 was made commander of the entire division.

The Canines' years in Germany were memorable ones. One of the houses they lived in had been the home of a very wealthy German manufacturer. Its floors were marbled, its orientals plush, and behind the paneled walls of one room had been concealed a small fortune in collector's coins which had been successfully hidden and then spirited out by the home's German mistress. Although conditions in much of postwar Europe were far from pleasant, Ruth was able to do some traveling, even venturing to Czechoslovakia on one occasion in a small retinue of fellow officers' wives. Voracious bargain hunters and avid museum goers, the women had once queued up at the end of a long line for what appeared to be a special tour. Much to their embarrassment, they were shortly advised by one English-speaking gentleman that they had mistakenly included themselves in a line of deportees.



Left to Right: Edwin A. Canine, General Canine, and Ralph J. Canine, Jr.

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The Canine family returned once more to the Washington, D.C., area when Ralph became Deputy Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence (G-2) on the Army Staff at the Pentagon. By now, both boys had grown and were living away from home. Ralph, Jr., was stationed in Germany and had plans to marry. Edwin was finishing his studies at the [redacted] Ruth was happily busy with tailoring class and making designer suits. Ralph had received his second star. Then came an event which would change his life forever and with it the lives of the many men and women employed at the then Armed Forces Security Agency at Arlington Hall, Virginia.

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II. THE NSA YEARS

In February 1951 Major General Ralph J. Canine was named director designate of the still fledgling Armed Forces Security Agency, or AFSA. Created in 1951, AFSA had been a bandage solution to the problem of interservice rivalry among the various service cryptologic elements, all of which had been pursuing their individual intelligence interests. The bandage, however, was not holding in place what would require major surgery, as the new Director would himself soon come to see.

In July AFSA's first Director, Admiral Earl Stone, retired, and Canine, after having spent the previous five months acquainting himself with the workings of the young intelligence agency, stepped into the directorship. Ralph, who liked to refer to himself as "an old mule-skinner" because of his four times commanding pack artillery mule units, lacked any hard knowledge of communications intelligence. Nevertheless, his fine-tuned organizational skills and no-nonsense manner would prove a boon to AFSA and to its successor, NSA.

Canine's first concerns were what he perceived to be the lack of clear-cut responsibilities within the Agency as well as a continued and fundamental dispute over the allocation of responsibilities among the service cryptologic agencies. By August he had approved Agency reorganization plans submitted to him by his Chief of Staff and was already devoting the majority of his time to establishing a better coordination of the national cryptologic effort. On a smaller but certainly more visible scale, he also reorganized another aspect of life at AFSA by calling for a rearrangement of desks and file cabinets according to color and material - a move which forever sealed his memory into the hearts of countless employees. Regardless of what it appeared to be, however, the furniture reorganization was intended to have more than cosmetic effects. He hoped that it, along with other improvements in work-related matters, would signal a new beginning for AFSA to its employees.

Despite his best efforts, however, the new AFSA Director was unable to remake entirely an organization which needed even more drastic changes. This had not passed unnoticed at the White House and in that same year, President Truman appointed the Brownell Committee to investigate the prospects for a better coordination of U.S. intelligence operations. Working closely with Canine, the committee was soon able to identify the most serious ailments of the national cryptologic system and submitted its findings to the President. Within a year the National Security Council issued what many would come to regard as NSA's birth certificate - NSCID No. 9. This document established the National Security Agency and assigned to it all responsibility for the American communications intelligence mission. The directive was followed by an announcement by Truman which changed AFSA's name to NSA and assigned all Comsec responsibilities to the Director, NSA. A week later, Canine was endeavoring to preserve the integrity of NSCID No. 9 and the scope of freedom which it permitted to the new Agency. Following a meeting which the executive committee of the NSA working group

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had regarding the Agency's basic concept of operations, he held a two and one-half hour session, informing the committee of what he envisioned for his Agency. That management philosophy, which emphasized NSA's need to retain the authority and freedom outlined in NSCID No. 9, was included in the committee's document on the subject of NSA's future operations for the U.S. Secretary of Defense. It was agreed that the Agency needed to *foster certain strengths in order to avoid repeating the failure of AFSA.*

Canine's curiosity about the workings of his intelligence agency led him out to the halls and offices where his employees worked. Always interested in all aspects of NSA's many and varied projects, he would often stop at desks to talk with analysts and learn more about what they were doing. This habit not only increased his own knowledge of the Agency, but also increased employee awareness of him and undoubtedly contributed significantly to his great popularity, as well as to many stories about the Agency's colorful Director. One anecdote describes how Canine went into a particularly sensitive area one day to gain a better understanding of the work done there. Upon noting his unexpected entry into the area, a young woman working there threw herself across the papers on her desk and eyed him suspiciously. When she was asked for information regarding her work, the woman told Canine that it was too classified for him to see. He patiently explained that he was General Canine, the Agency's Director. The woman remained unconvinced of his "need to know," however, and obstinately replied that she wouldn't show him the work "even if he were a colonel."

Canine was known for an almost alarming straightforwardness. He despised pretense and often reminded his senior managers that they had to explain things so that "the old mule skinner" could understand - in other words, save the convoluted explanations and the technical jargon. More than one briefer was interrupted during his briefing and asked to explain what he really meant. According to Canine, if he couldn't be made to understand what one of his managers was trying to explain, then chances were that that manager probably didn't understand either. Canine also liked to remind senior employees of the importance of their jobs. It was not unusual for him to stop one and ask, "What did you do today to earn your pay?"

One of Canine's major concerns during his tenure as Director was what many referred to simply as "the big move" - NSA's move from its three locations, Arlington Hall Station, Nebraska Avenue, and U Street, to Fort Meade, Maryland. Initially, plans for a relocation of the National Security Agency had called for a move to Fort Knox, Kentucky. Advocates for a site closer to the Washington, D.C., area prevailed, however, and a construction contract for the Agency's new building was awarded in 1954. Considerable time and thought were devoted to ensuring that the Agency's move would be a smooth one, despite the enormous logistics problem involved in transferring not only offices and employees, but employees' families as well, to a new location. Particular attention was paid to the needs of the personnel, many of whom would have to relocate in order to be within reasonable commuting distances of Fort Meade. A column called "Fort Meade Movement News" which supplied information on housing, schools, and other facilities in the Fort Meade area became a regular feature of the NSA Newsletter. Bus tours of the new site, as well as of local apartment and housing complexes, were provided weekly to employees and their families. A Meadmobile serviced by a Personnel Task Unit was set up in the picnic area of Arlington Hall Station to provide additional information on the move to Agency personnel. After two interim moves involving a relatively small percentage of NSA's population, and several postponements of the main move, the Agency was successfully relocated in the fall of 1957, one year after Canine's retirement as Director. Effectively, he had devoted most of his years at the Agency to matters associated with the Fort Meade move.

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Edwin A. Canine and Ruth W. Canine

NSA's Director worked hard on behalf of his Agency and devoted much time to lobbying for NSA to receive a greater portion of the resources pie. It was Canine who successfully fought for the advent of supergrades at NSA in order to be able to pay his people what he thought they deserved. In 1954, Dr. Abraham Sinkov, William F. Friedman, and Dr. Solomon Kullback received the first supergrade promotions in the Agency when they were each promoted to GS-16. Canine was persistent in his determination to put the Agency on the map and to make people, both those on the outside as well as those inside its walls, realize how important NSA's mission was.

He took a keen interest in personnel matters, particularly relating to the hiring of new employees and the subsequent training provided for them. Before Canine's tenure as Director, there had been no training school. He, however, quickly saw the necessity of training his employees in classes particularly structured around NSA's unique work, and he became one of the biggest advocates of job-related instruction in the classroom. Disenchanted with what he perceived to be a lack of strong managerial experience on the part of his seniors, he implemented a special management training program for them. According to Canine, the effort and cooperation of NSA's employees was integral to the work which NSA had laid out for it and its future as an intelligence agency. NSA and its people could not be thought of as separate entities, for the work could only be accomplished by people, and the people could only function with meaningful and challenging work.

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Canine's vision of what NSA was and what it could be often drove him to take action himself on matters which he might have left to his managers. If he was concerned over the caliber of mathematicians being hired, he'd talk to his top mathematicians and implement a new hiring procedure. If he saw that an important project was in desperate need of additional funding to succeed, he'd knock on doors until he found someone who could get the funds. If he felt that a contractor wasn't meeting specifications, he'd threaten to cancel the contract. It was Ralph's foresight which stubbornly pushed and prodded NSA into the world of high-tech at a time when the computer industry itself was newborn.

NSA's no-nonsense Director was not necessarily liked by all he came into contact with, but he was respected. His time at the Agency has not been forgotten by analysts who still remember the Director who'd routinely visit their offices to inquire about their work. Certainly, his tenure is best remembered by those who worked closest to him and whose friendships with him extended far beyond the boundaries of Arlington Hall Station. The woman who served as his secretary from the time of his pre-AFSA days in West Germany until his retirement in 1956, still maintains close ties with the Canine family. [REDACTED] is still called "Suzie" by the Canines, the name which her boss rechristened her with, telling her that he thought Thelma was too hard to remember. On a wall in the Canine living room hangs an oil portrait of Canine in his uniform, a token of William Friedman's appreciation for his efforts on behalf of procuring him a substantial cash award.

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And, of course, stories of Canine meander through the winding corridors of Fort Meade today, although some more personal anecdotes may not be as well known. Ruth Canine, for her part, insists that her husband was so quiet about his job that she never had any idea what NSA did until a comment of Bill Friedman's revealed a little to her. She still recalls having been asked to leave the Canine house at Fort McNair one day for several hours when a newsman stopped by to talk to her husband about the Petersen spy case. She was forced to wait out the talk on a set of uncomfortable bleachers by the house. Ruth also remembers how her husband enjoyed socializing with his Agency personnel and how difficult it was to get him to pay attention to his dinner at parties. Canine would be surrounded by men until his wife would admonish him to return to his table and have at least a little dinner. His customary response was that he was "with his boys" and "having too good a time to eat." One anecdote which suggests that at least some of the Canine reticence about work has been carried on to future generations concerns Edwin Canine's entry into the NSA workforce. Edwin was interviewed and hired without the knowledge of anyone in his family, including his father who was Director at the time. The senior Canine first heard of his son's employment from the Agency personnel office which had been told by Edwin when they asked if he was related to General Canine that he "guessed you could call him a blood relative." Edwin reportedly also inherited his father's talent for golf, for it was Ralph, Jr., not Edwin, who his father referred to as "the H and H" golfer - for hit 'em and hunt 'em.

III. RETIREMENT

Canine's aggressiveness on behalf of establishing NSA as a strong and competent Agency was not appreciated by all. According to some reports, he stepped on a few toes when he decided to pursue his vision of a powerful NSA. Four years after NSA was created, after having completed his prescribed four year tour as head of NSA, Lieutenant General Ralph J. Canine stepped down as Director one slightly overcast November afternoon.

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On 13 November 1956 at three o'clock in a room at the CIA, Canine was officially thanked for his work at NSA when he was awarded the Distinguished Intelligence Medal, and a letter of appreciation from the Secretary of Defense. After the ceremony, the Canines drove to the new home they had had built in McLean, Virginia, leaving their old Fort McNair quarters after seven years.

In a sense, he never really retired from NSA. He was retained as a consultant and was often asked back to Fort Meade, the new site of the Agency. In 1968, he received the Meritorious Service Award and the Exceptional Civilian Service Award, NSA's two highest awards, from a grateful Agency to its founding father.

In addition to his consulting work at the Agency, Canine was also a consultant for Burroughs Corporation and was very active in volunteer work, which he did for many years with his wife. A voracious reader, he could frequently be found in his home's library, occasionally abandoning his book to pay a visit to the candy dish in the next room, a habit he called "getting his exercise." He continued to work on his golf game and developed an interest in gardening.

On 9 March, 1969, after 11 years of "retirement," Ralph J. Canine died at the age of 73 unexpectedly in Walter Reed Army Hospital of a pulmonary embolism. Legacies of Canine's tenure as Director of NSA and its predecessor, AFSA, are evident in today's increasingly demanding intelligence environment when we remember that the groundwork laid by NSA's first Director was based on a vision of the Agency as a strong organization whose people and work existed in a relationship of interdependency.

My thanks and appreciation go to the following individuals for the invaluable information which they provided me on the life of our first Director: Mrs. Ralph J. Canine, Mr. Edwin Canine, Mr. Arthur Levinson, Mrs. Thelma Fontayn, and Mr. Richard Leibler.

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[redacted] is certified as a linguist in Italian and French. She is also a [redacted]

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