

It's tough to be the President's son!

Prying eyes and envious critics make life hectic for Maj. John Eisenhower and his family; sometimes he can't even tell who his real friends are.

by Jack Harrison Pollack



WHEN MAJ. JOHN EISENHOWER was nominated to be a lieutenant colonel, some envious Americans scoffed, "No wonder he got promoted—his old man's the boss! My life would be a snap, too, if my father were President of the United States!"

Obviously, there are advantages in being President Eisenhower's only child. But there are also disadvantages, a lot of them.

The editors of Family Weekly asked me to assess them, based on my talks with John Eisenhower himself, his charming wife Barbara, their relatives, family friends, and White House officials.

To begin with, if your father is President, you have considerably less freedom than the average American. You lead a kind of goldfish-bowl existence. Unlike those who revel in being in the public eye, 36-year-old Major Eisenhower dislikes having his private life invaded. He would prefer to live quietly with his family in their modest Alexandria, Va., house, but as "Ike Jr." that's not possible.

One of the penalties in being the President's son is that photographers are always ready to focus on you and your family. Not long ago they even invaded the privacy of his small Gettysburg cottage by setting up long-range telephoto lenses on a nearby road to photograph him visiting his father.

John Eisenhower, though, is far more concerned about the limelight's effect on his four children: David, 11, Anne, 10, Susan, 7, and Mary Jean, 3. "It's not good for kids to get too much attention," he says. "David especially eats it up—he's a real ham. He'd stand on his head if the photographers asked him. But Barbara and I want to keep our kids as normal as possible."

Nowadays, whenever John Eisenhower is

assigned to a new Army post, he immediately invites newsmen to a press conference in an attempt to get the publicity over with. At one such conference at Fort Belvoir, Va., several years ago, I remember how Major Eisenhower insisted that all pictures be taken outside. "I don't want the strong lights to bother the kids," he explained.

Another disadvantage in being the President's son is that regardless of how capable or hard-working you are, cynics will always say that your advancement is due to your name rather than to your abilities. Actually, John Eisenhower leans over backward not to take advantage of his name or position. Many of his Army colleagues have told me that he is careful not to ask for favors precisely because he is the President's son.

"John works harder than most of us because of this desire to stand on his own two feet," says an officer who served with him. "But what's really tough is that, in his heart, he may never know how good an officer he really is."

Major Eisenhower's problem is complicated by the fact that some people will always make things easier for him—just as some will make it harder—because his father is Commander-in-Chief. When Ike's son was stationed overseas and at camps throughout the U.S., it often embarrassed him when visiting brass went out of their way to look him up.

Still, John's promotions to date haven't been as fast as many of his 1944 West Point classmates. When he became a captain in March, 1946, about half of his class had already achieved that rank (even though John was in the upper third of his class). The same was true when he made major in August, 1951.

On March 14 of this year he was number 1,002 on a list of 1,319 recommendations for

lieutenant colonel, and he probably won't make it until the Spring of 1960. Compared with his classmates, this isn't unusually rapid advancement. Some officers even hold his name against him when he comes up for promotion.

It would be easier for Ike's son to get ahead if he weren't in the Army. A hard-boiled Washington insider reflects, "If John were a lawyer, insurance man, or business executive, he could make a barrel of money because his clients would try to cash in on his connections. But how can you make a buck in the Army?"

In July, 1957, John considered leaving the Army when an Eastern university offered him a job at three times his Army pay (he now makes about \$735 a month, and as a lieutenant colonel he would make about \$815 a month). He pondered the offer not only because he has four young mouths to feed but because he enjoys the academic atmosphere; he taught English at West Point in 1951 while studying for his master's degree at Columbia University.

Finally, though, he turned down the offer, realizing that it may have been tendered to him because of who he was. He had another reason which he explained to his father this way: it's difficult to keep young officers in service today, and it would look bad for the President's son to quit the Army merely for a higher-paying civilian job. When Dwight Eisenhower proudly told this story to a group of Congressmen, he mused, "Gentlemen, it isn't easy being the son of the President."

Probably John's hardest problem, though, is not knowing who his real friends are. The suspicion that he may not be liked just for himself is unavoidable. It probably accounts for John's reputation for being reticent and aloof. But what is often mistaken for shyness is his deep conviction that everybody—even a President's son—has a right to privacy. I find him publicity-constrained, not shy.

Several years ago, while visiting him and Barbara at his Fort Leavenworth Army home, I casually asked him how he felt about being in the national spotlight.

"Well, I'm used to it by this time," he admitted. "Whenever I come to a new post, I'm a curiosity for a while—more of a curiosity than I may realize. But when we get settled down after a few weeks, I'm generally taken for granted by everyone."

Last year when working in the Pentagon, Major Eisenhower found that out in strong terms. During a staff meeting which he attended, another Army officer exclaimed, "Now if the President only knew what in the devil this was all about..." The President's son remained nonchalant, making no comment, and the Army officer wasn't at all embarrassed.

John didn't have any of these problems during his first 18 years. He led an obscure existence as an "Army brat." Ike was just another Army captain and major then.

John was undecided whether to become a newspaperman-educator like his Uncle

Milton, a lawyer like his Uncle Edgar, or a soldier like his father. Though the choice was unmistakably his own, his father may have influenced him indirectly.

In the Fall of 1940, tall, blue-eyed John Eisenhower entered Millard's, a Washington, D.C., prep school for West Point, where most of the students were sons of regular Army officers. One day a classmate asked him, "Is that fair-haired lieutenant colonel everybody is talking about your dad?"

"Don't hold it against me," replied John.

When he graduated from West Point on June 6, 1944—the D-Day launched by his father—John Eisenhower got his first real taste of being a celebrity. "I was suddenly surrounded by banks of photographers," he recalls. They've never been far from him since.

DURING the Korean war when his father was running for President for the first time, John was quite sensitive about what he called his "notoriety." Major Eisenhower, who rose to be assistant chief of staff of G-2 (intelligence), received a crank letter denouncing his father. A fellow officer who saw it said, "I hope you'll tell that stinker off!"

"I'm just going to write and try to explain why I think he's wrong," replied John. "After all, he's entitled to his opinion."

When President-elect Eisenhower flew to Korea, his soldier son characteristically remained in the background while his father talked to his commanding officers. When outgoing Commander-in-Chief Truman ordered John home briefly in January, 1953, to attend his father's inaugural, Major Eisenhower became angry at first for being snatched from his front-line duties. But later he realized it was just a thoughtful gesture by President Truman, and he told an Army buddy, "Gosh, but the White House is big. And a lot more comfortable than Korea!"

Today Maj. John Eisenhower is on temporary assignment at the White House as an assistant to Brig. Gen. Andrew J. Goodpaster, a Presidential staff secretary. If his father weren't the President, he probably wouldn't have this job. But Major Eisenhower is a soldier and has to follow orders. Yet I suspect that John often wishes that he were stationed elsewhere than the Washington area because it only complicates his life.

Usually spurning Washington party invitations, the young Eisenhowers confine their social life to a small group of Army friends. They dislike name-droppers or any form of pretentiousness. Not long ago when he was asked if he planned to join the Army-Navy club, John replied, "I'm not sure I can afford it. Besides, the club has such a long waiting list, it might take years to get accepted."

A sensible, good-looking future lieutenant colonel doesn't talk about the disadvantages of being the only son of the 34th President of the United States. He emphasizes the positive.

But when I add it all up, I can only conclude that it's mighty tough to be the President's son.