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# The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign: A Study of Failure in High Command

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1930s. Traditional historians view the formation of the Grand Alliance simply as a response to the need to combat Hitler. Edmonds, however, claims that Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt viewed the Grand Alliance not only as an ephemeral relationship dictated by military necessity but also as a prelude to the establishment of a new international order.

Each member of the triumvirate was a product of the nineteenth century, and each possessed the ability to galvanize a people's endeavor at the moment of supreme challenge. The author credits Hitler, the self-proclaimed arbiter of the New European Order that was constructed on the basis of German military power, for creating the conditions that made the Grand Alliance feasible. Ironically, Hitler and his Axis partners never matched the Big Three's success in developing a grand strategy.

What is interesting is Edmonds's observation of the changes within the Grand Alliance during the course of the war. Roosevelt and Churchill clearly were the dominant members from 1940-1943, though Stalin was contributing the lion's share of manpower against Hitler. But Edmonds states that by November 1943, at the Teheran Conference (which the author views as the most significant wartime conference), Stalin had clearly become the principal partner and emerges as the most effective of the World War II leaders. Teheran was the last time that Churchill conferred with the others on an equal level, and the first time any real attempt was

made to address the political future of postwar Europe.

Edmonds credits the partnership with two great objectives achieved and charges it with two issues left unresolved. The successes were the defeat of Hitler and the destruction of Nazism, and also the establishment of the United Nations. However, the Alliance leaders failed to address adequately the impact of nuclear weaponry on world strategy and politics and, by largely ignoring the German question, they failed to lay the foundation for the establishment of a lasting peace in Central Europe. Perhaps it was impossible to make a quick peace after such a long war, but the Grand Alliance proved far more successful at waging war than establishing peace.

In summary, Edmonds has written a masterful study that is likely to become the definitive work in its field.

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English, John A. *The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign: A Study of Failure in High Command*. New York: Praeger, 1991. 347pp. \$47.95

Lieutenant Colonel English is one of those rare birds: a career soldier who is also a genuine intellectual. A former member of the Directing Staff of the Canadian Land Forces Command and Staff College, English has written a welcome and necessary addition to the literature. As his subtitle bluntly

states, the author has little regard for Canadian generalship in the Second World War.

His work is divided into two sections: Book One examines the background and preparation of the Canadian army for its participation in the Second World War; Book Two is an analysis of the Canadian army operations from the Normandy beachhead (around 13 June 1944) to the closing of the Falaise Gap on 21 August.

During the crucial years of 1930–1935, chief of the general staff “Andy” McNaughton (himself an inventor) put great emphasis on technology, and he favoured engineers and gunners. He also believed that a citizen-army raised from scratch could fight under its own leaders. This, English argues, was almost as harmful to professionalism for the permanent militia (as the regular army was called until 1939) as was the contempt of the infamous Sir Sam Hughes before and during the Great War.

In 1944 the British insisted that McNaughton be recalled to Canada because of the poor showing of the Canadian units under his command during training exercises. (These units contained more British than Canadians.) General Harry Crerar replaced McNaughton. He had no army command experience in battle—not even corps or divisional command—and he never had the confidence of the army group commander, Bernard Montgomery. Therefore, in the author’s opinion, the Canadians would have done much better under

the command of a British general. Just who this might have been is not made clear. In any case, uneven generalship placed excellent troops in bad tactical situations against the better-trained German forces.

Slow to expand their portion of the beachhead—like everyone else in Normandy—the Canadians became truly bogged down at Caen when they faced the seriously depleted 12th SS Panzer Division and its “Siegfriedesque commander,” Standartenführer Kurt Meyer. Major General Charles Foulkes’s 2nd Canadian Division and Major General Rod Keller’s 3rd Canadian Division (part of Lieutenant General Guy Simonds’s 2nd Canadian Corps) met with disaster on 20–21 July 1944 at Verrieres Ridge because the divisional commanders did not insist that armour give intimate support to infantry. They repeated their mistakes and, because of “complicated and disconnected” planning and weak thrusting, produced a “tactical debacle” at the same location on 25 July.

Things were no better in August when the II Corps tried to launch a heavy attack from the Caen sector in the direction of Falaise. The author blames Crerar, who had been hoping for a Canadian triumph to match the Canadian Corps’ victory at Amiens on 8 August 1918. Crerar should have overruled Simonds’s order to delay Phase II of the attack, but that would have taken the ability of a Dempsey or a Patton. Thus, says English, Simonds was left “without any of the

usual counsel, help, and coercion that he might have received from army headquarters.”

The final misadventure in this litany of errors was the failure to close the Falaise Gap on 14 August. Simonds’s “Operation Tractable” is described by the commander of the 7th Brigade as “certainly one of the strangest attack formations anyone ever dreamed up and without a hope . . . of succeeding as planned.” Closing the gap could have been a Canadian feat of arms; instead it became the task of four Allied armies.

English disagrees with the belief that the principal reason for Canadian failure in Normandy was a breakdown in regimental command. He blames the inexperience and the inadequate professional preparation of Canadian generals—exacerbated by the shackles of British doctrine—and too little staff or tactical depth to overcome such weaknesses.

English makes excuses for Simonds, relying heavily on General Montgomery’s judgement of the man: he has devoted an entire chapter to “The Montgomery Measurement.” He also documents the careful and professional thought that Simonds put into his planning. However, Simonds’s record after Normandy is spotty. If the entire record of the Canadian army in the Second World War is taken into account, there were by English’s measure other Canadian divisional commanders as good or better (Hoffmeister in Italy comes to mind, and he was not a peacetime regular).

This work is a welcome, necessary, and distinguished addition to the literature. The negative verdict on Canadian higher command is, in general, well supported, but English’s affirmation of Simonds remains in doubt.

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Gannon, Michael. *Operation Drumbeat*. New York: Harper & Row, 1990. 419pp. \$24.95

About 2:00 p.m. (EST) on 10 April 1942 a German type IXB U-boat, *U-123*, rose from her daytime resting place on the seabed to begin her evening’s search off St. Augustine Beach, Florida. Commanded by Kapitänleutnant Reinhard Hardegen, *U-123* was near the end of her second patrol to the U.S. coast in support of “Operation Drumbeat.” In the early evening Hardegen sighted a tanker steaming alone on her maiden voyage northward to New York with 90,000 barrels of fuel oil; it was the SS *Gulf-america*. At 10:20, *U-123* torpedoed the tanker off Jacksonville Beach. The explosion and fire brought people out onto the beach, from which she was clearly visible. To finish the kill, Hardegen coned *U-123* between the tanker and the beach so that his shells would not hit land. The *U-123* left the scene without being engaged by the forces responding to the distress calls. As was usually the case, German submarine attacks on merchant ships