

UNBALANCING MONTY: OPERATION GOODWOOD AND THE EFFECT OF STRESS ON HIGHER COMMAND

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Assessing Montgomery's command during the Second World War is still today far from conclusive. The analysis of his controversial personality, plenty of vanity garnished with "his strangely cruel humour",¹ as well as the myriad of opinions of those close to him, has influenced the way we approach the study of his command. In a speech to the entire US Army Command and General Staff College on 8 April 1952, Field Marshal Sir William Slim affirmed that: "Command is an intensively personal affair. [It] is that mixture of example, persuasion and compulsion by which you get men to do what you want them to do, even if they do not want to do it themselves. If you ask me really to define it, I should say command is the projection of personality - and like all true art, and command is an art, it is exercised by each man in his own way."² Being as it was a refined definition of higher command, it focuses only on the projection of the commander's image, ignoring how the truth behind the image might be affecting command. Consequently Montgomery's historical assessment so far has not explored how stress, fatigue and pressure influenced his decision-making at the operational level, and therefore how he "armed himself against the strains and stresses of an extended battle"³ is something which we can only guess. However there are some subtle aspects of his command during July 1944 which are worth exploring in order to reveal his amazing capacity for adaptation and will power, but also his human mental and physical limitations.

"Had Montgomery failed?" started to be often heard inside the Supreme High Command of the Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) and Whitehall following the slow progress after the initial success of the Normandy landings.⁴ Major General Sir Francis "Freddie" de Guignand, GCS 21 AG, was trying hard "to shield his master [Montgomery] as far as possible from their impact", so he could "exercise all his powers of concentration free of outside distractions."⁵ Montgomery was also aware of the importance for any commander at war to, "Keep fit and fresh, physically and mentally. You will never win battles if you become mentally tired, or get run down on health."⁶ Bearing in mind that he has been at war since 1940, this essay will focus on Operation GOODWOOD as an example to understand how stress and political and

¹ Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield, 1942-1944* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1983), p. 718.

² Field Marshal Sir William Slim, "Higher Command in War", *Military Review* (May-June 2020), pp. 55 and 57.

³ Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield*, p. 717.

⁴ General Sir Charles Richardson, *Send for Freddie: The Story of Montgomery's Chief of Staff* (London: William Kimber, 1987), p. 157.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Zita Steel, *Bernard Montgomery's Art of War* (Fletcher & Co. Publishers, 2020), p. 75.

military pressure, together with a self-image built upon memories of past (and glorious) victories, were factors “unbalancing” Montgomery’s command.

On 10 July 1944, General Montgomery met General Dempsey, CO Second British Army, and General Bradley, CO First US Army, in order to discuss the general situation of the Twenty First Army Group (21 AG). Everyone envisaged the possibility of a massive breakout to happen soon, but somehow the Germans, although always mostly on the defensive, managed to check the Allies’ offensives with enough skill and determination as to bring back memories of World War One slow and costly offensives. The fear of stalemate was growing and the impossibility of taking Caen during the first days of D-Day transformed into deep concern, causing Eisenhower “legitimate anxiety”.⁷ Even before the assault on Normandy took place, Churchill was already acknowledging the need for speed in order to avoid a slow and painful campaign. As he confessed during late 1943 after being briefed on Operation OVERLORD: “I wake up at night and see the Channel floating with bodies of the cream of our youth.” A nightmare he could not forget after the disastrous amphibious landings at Salerno in September 1943 and Anzio in January 1944. Constantly pressed to expand the area controlled by the Second British Army and the First Canadian Army, the pressure on Montgomery was extraordinary.⁸ General Eisenhower, Commander in Chief of the Allied Expeditionary Force, was especially persistent in the urgency of gaining territory between the rivers Orne and Odon: “It appears to me that we must use all possible energy in a determined effort to prevent a stalemate or of facing the necessity of fighting a major defensive battle with the slight depth we now have in the bridgehead.”⁹

If the anxiety over the stiff German opposition in Italy and the slow progress in Normandy was not enough, the appearance over London’s skies of the latest German invention, the “flying bombs” V1, dramatically increased the anguish of the British Cabinet. Churchill was specially affected by this new weapon forcing him to overwork - and overdrink. “As a result he was in a maudlin, bad tempered, drunken mood, ready to take offence at anything, suspicious of everybody, and in a highly vindictive mood against the Americans. In fact so vindictive that his whole outlook on strategy was warped.”¹⁰ The pressure on the Government was so high that made the British strategy lose interest in liberating Paris and started to shift towards a strategy further North, looking to the Channel Ports and Antwerp in a hurry to find and destroy all V1 (and the V2 from September 1944 onwards) launching sites. Such pressure would fall onto Montgomery, even though “Monty was certain there was no way through the German defences on the eastern flank”.¹¹ Even if he would use the V1 menace in order to get political backing for his operations on the eastern flank and gain access to the much needed strategic and tactical air support, he could not get rid of all the weight to quickly get acceptable results on the battlefield.

⁷ Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield, 1942-1944*, p. 716.

⁸ John Buckley, *Monty’s Men: The British Army and the Liberation of Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2014), p. 112.

⁹ Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield, 1942-1944*, p. 716.

¹⁰ Alex Danchev and Daniel Todman, eds., *War Diaries 1939-1945: Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke* (London: Phoenix Press, 2002), p. 566.

¹¹ Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield, 1942-1944*, p. 720.

The slow gain of ground in the British sector obliged Montgomery to review unit performance with an increasingly critical eye. In such a critical situation, the removal of field commanders turned out to be the only solution available for him in order to try and renew the fighting spirit of those units receiving criticism. After all, “The readiness of senior officers to dismiss subordinates who had failed was underlined by the comparatively short tenure of command enjoyed by most divisional commanders.”¹² The removal of Major General Charles Bullen-Smith, CO 51 Highland Division (51 HD), is a good example to understand the pressure under which Montgomery had to operate and how vital it had become for his divisional commanders to maintain morale at all costs. The fact that the Normandy campaign on the Second Army sector progressed at such a high cost meant that even if the 51 Highland Division managed to hold the area between the roads from Breville, Herouville and Troarn, its commander was accused of not being able to sustain the morale of his troops, and ultimately was held responsible for the failure of not capturing the German observation posts located at the Colombelles factory. Although the discharge of General Bullen-Smith had more to do with the false premises on which this attack was planned, such as ignoring the patrols’ intelligence pointing against the belief that the area was thinly guarded, which explains why 153 Brigade was sent alone against the 21 Panzer Division,¹³ it was also true that, as Major Lindsay, Second-in-Command 1 Gordons, summarised, “There is still a lot of talk about morale. The truth is that everybody is rather ashamed of the failure of the Colombelles attack, the first reverse this Brigade has had since anybody can remember.”¹⁴ The problem with the 51 HD - and other units such as the 7 Armoured “Desert Rats” Division- was that they had been deployed for far too long and, “Undoubtedly the Highland Division was tired.”¹⁵ Lieutenant General Sir Brian Horrocks analysed the problem when taking command of 30 Corps, following the removal of Lieutenant General Gerard Bucknall, and concluded that: “I have always felt that this aspect of divisional psychology was never properly studied during the last war. After a longish period of fighting, the soldiers, though capable of looking after themselves, begin to see all the difficulties and lack the *elan* of fresh troops. They begin to feel it is time they had a rest and someone else did some fighting.”¹⁶ Moreover not only was combat fatigue affecting soldiers and junior officers; July was full of divisional commanders suffering the effects of mental strain. For example, after the attempts to capture Carpiquet airfield on 4 July (Operation WINDSOR), Montgomery was informed of “a lack of control and leadership [and] lack of calm, balanced judgement and firm command” displayed by the operational commander, Major General Rod F.L. Keller, CO 3 (Canadian) Infantry Division.¹⁷

¹² David French, “Colonel Blimp and the British Army: British Divisional Commanders in the War against Germany, 1939-1945”, *English Historical Review*, Vol. 111, No. 444 (1996), p. 1199.

¹³ Anthony King, “Why did the 51st Highland Division fail? A case-study in command and combat effectiveness”, *British Journal for Military History*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2017), pp. 63-65.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁶ Carlo D’Este, *Decision in Normandy: The Real Story of Montgomery and the Allied Campaign* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 277.

¹⁷ Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield*, p. 714.

Montgomery hesitated little once he had decided to remove a senior officer, but low morale, high casualties, dreadful weather, and the constant need for junior and senior officers' replacements,¹⁸ meant that "orders" from Eisenhower on 7 July to launch "major full-dress attack on the left flank supported by everything we could bring to bear"¹⁹, could only be executed under a logic of "prudent risk".²⁰ It was at this precise moment when Montgomery found himself thrown into a Catch-22 dilemma. While Washington wanted to see further progress in Normandy pressing him to achieve a breakthrough, Whitehall on the other side was extremely anxious of the rate of casualties accumulated from D-Day and advised Montgomery to drastically reduce it.

The American press and some commanders had started to suggest that the 21 AG's slowness was being caused by attempts to reduce casualties. The US press, and above all Eisenhower's opinion of Montgomery, constantly brought up, "The old story again: 'He [Montgomery] was sparing British forces at the expense of the Americans, who were having all the casualties.'"²¹ This belief was adding unnecessary friction between the Allied High Command and the British Cabinet. Many had started to consider Montgomery lacking drive. Even Churchill had "[begun] to abuse Monty because operations were not going faster, and apparently Eisenhower had said that he was over cautious."²² Compared to the US capture of Cherbourg and the Cotentin peninsula, it is no surprise that Dempsey's Second Army started to appear as the weakest link. On top of this Montgomery also had to consider the fact that the rate of casualties in Normandy meant that sooner than later the British forces would need to "cannibalise" brigades in order to recover divisional fighting strength.²³ As General Dempsey reflected after the war, "we had put almost all our available man-power into Normandy in the first few weeks."²⁴ It was no secret that the quick rate of casualties was a worrying factor for the British Armed Forces, most of all because of its negative impact on morale and operational efficiency as well as combat performance.

From D-Day to the end of June 1944, the Allied Expeditionary Forces suffered almost 23,000 casualties.²⁵ For the British Government and the High Command the high rate of casualties had far reaching consequences compared to her American ally. The problem of finding replacements and training them in enough quantities and speed as the Normandy campaign required was not possible. London wanted this message to

¹⁸ Carlo D'Este, *Decision in Normandy*, p. 279.

¹⁹ Niall Barr, *Eisenhower's Armies: The American-British Alliance during World War II* (New York and London: Pegasus Books, 2017), p. 381.

²⁰ The concept is extracted from the following paragraph of the US Field Manual (FM) 6-22, *Leader Development* quoted in Maj. Dana M. Gingrich (US Army), "Do Large-Scale Combat Operations Require a New Type of Leader", *Military Review* (September-October 2019), p. 134: "Leaders must lead by example to model the desired behavior for their organizations, leaders must develop others to instill mission command within their organizations, and leaders must prepare themselves to accept **prudent risk** to seize opportunities on a dynamic battlefield." My emphasis.

²¹ A. Danchev and D. Todman, eds., *War Diaries 1939-1945: Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke*, p. 574.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 566.

²³ Carlo D'Este, *Decision in Normandy*, p. 355.

²⁴ Dempsey's notes on Goodwood, Checked and Revised 28.03.52, WO CAB 106/1061, p. 12. Documents free to access in <https://ww2talk.com/index.php?threads/sir-general-miles-dempsey-and-operation-goodwood.55626/> Accessed on 05/01/2022.

²⁵ Carlo D'Este, *Decision in Normandy*, p. 259.

be transmitted without any shadow of doubt and decided to send Lieutenant General Ronald 'Bill' Adam, the Adjutant General, to Normandy and inform Montgomery and Dempsey "of the War Office's inability to replace infantry losses beyond the end of July."²⁶ The logic behind avoiding high casualties was a matter of command culture based on the experience of World One, but also as a way to maintain morale and cohesion within the ranks. It also shows the effort to remain relevant within an uneven coalition in terms of manpower and military industrial might. Basically the British manpower "had by 1944 reached the bottom of the manpower barrel",²⁷ something which Williamson Murray believed made "the British became less willing to take risks and more unwilling to commit forces unless operations enjoyed an overwhelming chance of success."²⁸ The truth is, at least in the view of Operation GOODWOOD, quite the opposite. It is well known that Montgomery's World War One experience had a deep impact on his understanding of the relationship between overwhelming fire support and exhaustive planning and the reduction of casualties. "In the grim business of war, however, his [Montgomery] love and caring for his men, allied to an almost psychopathic clarity of mind in the stress and strain of battle, had led to his rapid promotion as a staff officer, and had given him, under Goringe, the 'bachelor general', a vision of how a modern army should be organized, trained and led in wartime."²⁹ Casualties were a key factor in his military thinking and "exerted a profound influence on Montgomery's conduct of the campaign."³⁰ The second factor was that he was, as Michael Howard believed, all too "determined by his perceptions of the limited capabilities"³¹ of the British/Canadian forces. The combination of both explained his strategy of constant pressure and small victories. However, it seems unreasonable to believe that Montgomery could really spare lives given the stalemate situation in early July.

Everyone above him was "forcing" him to do something and take risks. The need to give Bradley enough time to prepare an offensive in the Western sector around St. Lô meant that Montgomery had to increase the pressure on the Caen front. Montgomery's M510 Directive of 10 July considered an attack away from the stiff German resistance around Caen and the banks of the river Orne. Perhaps, "it may be best for Second Army to take over all the CAUMONT area - and to the west of it - and thus release some of Bradley's divisions for the southward 'drive' on the western flank. Day to day events in the next few days will show which is best."³² He was referring to the line comprising Thury-Harcourt-Mont Pincon-Le Béný Bocage; the Americans instead would move towards Avranches and swivel south-east towards the line Le Béný Bocage-Vire-Mortain. This idea seems to have been argued against by

²⁶ Carlo D'Este, *Decision in Normandy*, p. 355; John Buckley, *Monty's Men*, p. 93.

²⁷ Williamson Murray, "British Military Effectiveness in the Second World War", in A.R. Millett and W. Murray, eds., *Military Effectiveness. Vol. 3: The Second World War* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), p. 100.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²⁹ Nigel Hamilton, *The Full Monty. Volume I: Montgomery of Alamein, 1887-1942* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 128.

³⁰ Stephen A. Hart, *Colossal Cracks: Montgomery's 21st Army Group in Northwest Europe, 1944-45* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2007), p. 43.

³¹ Stephen A. Hart, *Colossal Cracks*, p. 6.

³² Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield*, p. 721.

the 21AG general staff, Brigadier Ronald F. Belchem (Special Planning Section), Brigadier Charles L. Richardson (Plans), and Brigadier Edgar T. Williams (Intelligence), on the basis that it, “would take both armies through the worst of the bocage.”³³ Montgomery changed his mind and alternatively agreed with Dempsey to plan an operation using for the first time an armour thrust with three armoured divisions. Consequently he ordered Dempsey to, “Go on hitting: drawing the German strength, especially the armour, onto yourself - so as to ease the way for Brad.”³⁴

Trading time with General Bradley so he could organise a powerful offensive (Operation COBRA) meant that GOODWOOD was planned in haste. All its tactical and operational problems were known in advance: impossibility for secrecy, lack of enough crossing bridges, and unmapped mine defensive area. Planners also knew that these factors would develop into further problems such as traffic jams, unusable roads due to the previous bombardment, lack of infantry support for the first advancing armour regiment, and impossibility of moving the field artillery together with the armour. On top of this, the probabilities of torrential rains and mist, as it happened throughout June and July, were high and would nail the air support to the ground for days on end. As Montgomery wrote to Phyllis Reynolds, wife of Amesbury headmaster Major Tom Reynolds, on 7 July: “All goes well here - except the weather which is completely foul; it seems quite impossible to get a whole fine day.”³⁵ Although armour-infantry experiences during June and July demonstrated that tactics had to be changed to adapt to the bocage geography, these lessons were yet to be “implemented”. In fact, senior officers such as Major General Evelyn H. Barker, CO 49 (West Riding) Infantry Division, and Brigadier Anthony D.R. Wingfield, acting CO 8 Armoured Brigade, expressed dissatisfaction with Montgomery and those who believed that “previous 8th Army practice [in North Africa] was necessarily best practice.”³⁶ Being all these factors known at the time, they should have been taken into consideration in order to either postpone or significantly alter the logic of an all-armour thrust.

Carlo D’Este believes Montgomery did not take an active part in the planning of GOODWOOD and that this was exclusively “the brainchild of Dempsey”.³⁷ This is rather difficult to believe even for D’Este himself, who acknowledges the fact that he was the “mastermind” behind all operations in Normandy.³⁸ Montgomery strongly believed that a commander had “to remain the central impulse on operations, especially in planning. [Operations had to be] diligently preplanned and well-prepared.”³⁹ Not only that, his personal involvement in operations usually caused organisational and command problems. As his own Main HQ Chief of Staff

³³ Richard Mead, *The Men behind Monty: The Staff and HQs of Eight Army and 21st Army Group* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2015), p. 174. Regretfully this author does not mention the document from where he extracted this information.

³⁴ Dempsey’s notes on Goodwood, WO CAB 106/1061, p. 10.

³⁵ Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield*, pp. 717-718.

³⁶ Charles Forrester, *Monty’s Functional Doctrine: Combined Arms Doctrine in British 21st Army Group in Northwest Europe, 1944-45* (Solihull: Helion & Co. Ltd.: 2015), p. 73.

³⁷ Carlo D’Este, *Decision in Normandy*, p. 355.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Stephen Hart, *Colossal Cracks*, pp. 76 and 78.

(Portsmouth) recognised, “It was very hard [for Guingand] because Monty was giving direct orders right down sometimes to divisions and bellow!”⁴⁰

Montgomery remark on January 1944 that, “I will never employ an armoured corps”,⁴¹ indicates that Montgomery was not thinking straight. Dempsey’s idea “to seize all the crossings of the Orne from Caen to Argentan - the nearer ones with the Canadians, and the further ones with the armour - thus shutting off the enemy’s main force, which lay west of the Orne”⁴² was certainly shared by Montgomery, but at the same time he firmly doubted that nothing else than capturing the crest of Bourguebus would be achieved. He also wanted to believe that airpower would weaken the enemy defensive lines up to a breaking point and therefore ignored his command experience and knowledge which indicated that was not usually the case. His self-deceit went as far as to convince him that using mostly armour would also keep casualties and therefore, “was prepared to accept heavy losses in them [tanks], providing the losses in men were low.”⁴³ Yet by the end of the operation casualties were not low, ranging between 3,500 and 5,500 soldiers, plus some 400 tanks also being lost, “an appalling loss rate of over 30 percent of 2 Army tanks committed to the battle”.⁴⁴ No matter how much Montgomery insisted on his long-term strategic vision, the grim reality was that this two-day operation was a tactical failure with high casualties.

The problem of analysing the effects of stress on higher command decision-making is that such a position demands “hiding” away any noticeable manifestation inherent to fatigue, either mental or physical. “The leader’s power of decision results from his ability to remain imperturbable in the crisis. He must have the moral courage to stand firm when his men are wavering.”⁴⁵ But also, as General Slim sagaciously remarked: “You have to be very careful to see that your strength of will does not become just obstinacy and that your flexibility of mind does not become mere vacillation.”⁴⁶ Furthermore the fact that “he never systematically conceptualised his own methods”,⁴⁷ as Stephen Hart believes, adds uncertainty when exploring his operational decisions during the Normandy campaign and complicates the understanding of the factors influencing his decisions. Undoubtedly Montgomery probably experienced by the end of July what General Slim illustrated when he said that, “[when] things have gone wrong, there always comes a pause when your men stop and - they look at you. They don’t say anything - they just look at you. It is a rather awful moment for the commander because he knows that their courage is ebbing, their will is fading, and he

⁴⁰ Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield*, p. 825.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 356.

⁴² Dempsey’s notes on Goodwood, WO CAB 106/1061, p. 13.

⁴³ Dempsey’s notes on Goodwood, WO CAB 106/1061, p. 5.

⁴⁴ Carlo D’Este mentions the figure of 5,537 in his article “Monty’s Armored Smokescreen”, *History Net*, <https://www.historynet.com/montys-armored-smokescreen.htm>. Accessed on 20 December 2021. Richard N. Armstrong instead says that the number of KIA, WIA and MIA in Goodwood amounted to 3,500. See his “What Next, General? Operation Goodwood, 1944”, *History Net*, <https://www.historynet.com/next-general-operation-goodwood-1944.htm>. Accessed on 5 January 2022.

⁴⁵ Zita Steel, *Bernard Montgomery’s Art of War*, p. 67.

⁴⁶ Slim, “Higher Command in War”, p. 61.

⁴⁷ Stephen A. Hart, *Colossal Cracks*, p. 11.

has got to pull up out of himself the courage and the will power that will stiffen them again and make them go on. He will never get over that moment unless he has the confidence of his men.”⁴⁸ After almost two months everyone was feeling utterly exhausted, including Montgomery. It was the conjunction of all these pressures together with the feeling of being unfairly judged and a growing need to remind everyone who he was that explains how a radically different operation such as that GOODWOOD came to exist. The accumulation of stress and mental weariness, the pressures from his political and military masters, but also the pressure created by how much everyone, including himself, expected from him, is what explains why this operation was in reality a deviation from Montgomery’s well tested set-piece battle approach.

⁴⁸ Field Marshal Sir William Slim, “Higher Command in War”, *Military Review* (May-June 2020), p. 62.