

# No easy thing

## Senior Command in the Canadian Army, 1939-1945

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Historians have tended to equate success with winning battles, failure with defeat, and yet there is much more to being successful in senior appointments than just battlefield victory. Success seems to call for a trilogy of abilities: the ability to defend national interests in the highest military (and often political) circles; the ability to organize and manage forces both before and during combat; and the ability to lead both directly and indirectly those who have to implement the plans. Are we right to apply this three-pillared standard? This article attempts to answer that question by reviewing the performance of the three generals who commanded First Canadian Army during the Second World War: Generals A.G.L. McNaughton and H.D.G. Crerar, and Lieutenant-General G.G. Simonds.<sup>1</sup> While the junior man of the group – Guy Simonds – appeared from the historical record to be the most successful and best regarded, what criteria have been used in these determinations?

It is worthwhile to consider the thoughts of three distinguished thinkers (two of them practitioners): Field Marshal Sir Archibald Wavell, historian Martin van Creveld, and Guy Simonds. In the 1939 Lees Knowles Lectures Wavell focussed

**Abstract: There is relatively little Canadian military history which looks specifically at the questions and themes surrounding senior command (commanders of large formations of troops – normally generals or lieutenant-generals). Current interpretations call for a trilogy of abilities: the ability to defend national interests in the highest military (and often political) circles; the ability to organize and manage forces both before and during combat; and the ability to lead both directly and indirectly those who have to implement the plans. Were Canadians then, and are historians today, right to apply this multiple standard? This article looks at the three officers who commanded First Canadian Army during the Second World War: Generals A.G.L. McNaughton, H.D.G. Crerar and G.G. Simonds. Where these commanders might well possess one or two of these abilities they could as easily have little competence in the third. Overall Crerar comes out as the best of the three.**

on three aspects of generalship: personal qualities; subordinates; and political masters. But he also quoted from Socrates who had said that “the general must know how to get his men their rations and every other kind of stores needed for war.”<sup>2</sup> Wavell felt that effective administration – providing for an army’s needs – was the “real crux of

generalship.”<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, generals also needed a range of personal attributes: mental and physical robustness, physical courage, health and youth, courage of convictions, knowledge of humanity and fighting spirit.<sup>4</sup> These were necessary to “keep strict, though not necessarily stern discipline,...[and give ungrudging] praise where praise is due,” be visible to the troops, avoid sarcasm and keep the soldiers informed.<sup>5</sup> These things, he said, were hard to do given that generals were far less visible to their soldiers than in times past. Finally, Wavell reminded his audience that the general and the politician worked in unique yet overlapping spheres and that cooperation was of vital importance for the successful conduct of the war.<sup>6</sup> Wavell painted a picture of a complex and demanding range of competencies.

In February 1944 Guy Simonds, shortly after assuming command of 2 Canadian Corps, prepared a summary of what he saw as the “Essential Qualities in the Leader.”<sup>7</sup> All were necessary for success. Some, such as knowledge, physical fitness and weapons skills, could be learned or “acquired” while others were “inherent.” Among the latter were “moral” qualities including “resolution” and “determination”: “A man who originates good ideas

and intentions but who is unable to get them put into practice may be useful in a pure research or in an advisory capacity, but is quite useless in any executive command.”<sup>8</sup>In addition to understanding warfighting doctrine a commander “must know how to command – how to delegate to his subordinates and his staff, how to control, how to position himself on the battlefield and make use of his communications, and, most importantly of all, he must have an understanding of human nature and how to ‘get at’ men.”<sup>9</sup> Simonds’ successful commander thus seemed to be someone who could use his knowledge of warfare to come up with appropriate solutions to problems and then use the people around him to turn these ideas into effective results.

Historian Martin van Creveld wrote in *Command in War* that “First, command must arrange and coordinate everything an army needs to exist... Second, command enables the army to carry out its proper mission [– the efficient destruction of the enemy force].”<sup>10</sup> Van Creveld believed that history is not like social science and that there should be no reluctance to look at specifics rather than broad trends: “a study of command cannot avoid asking the down to earth questions: who ordered whom to do what, when, by what means, on the basis of what information, what for, and to what ends.”<sup>11</sup> Conversely, he



**Lieutenant-General Andrew McNaughton was the first to command First Canadian Army. He was found wanting in a number of areas and replaced in 1943.**

says, the challenge is to find answers to these questions without resorting to a few examples as this sampling can “distort reality.” To study command and commanders is not an easy undertaking he concludes. “To make the task manageable, it is necessary to limit the analysis to the purely military side of things.”<sup>12</sup>

Synthesizing these models, it seems that commanders must, implicitly or explicitly, demonstrate a considerable and well developed intellect which permits them to deal with complex situations. They must also be able to lead their subordinates,

instilling confidence and providing guidance and direction, and be managers of large and multidimensional organizations. They must have a mastery of the nature and functions of military organizations and of warfighting, and when needed of the interface between military and political controls.

During the war there was one other criterion which was used to assess Canadian and all Commonwealth senior commanders and that was the British penchant for experience. It was seen by the British as somewhere between odd and unacceptable to appoint senior commanders who had not experienced combat and commanded at lower levels. For Canadians, who had lived in peace for two decades this was a hard hurdle to get over.

When “Andy” McNaughton was appointed general officer commanding-in-chief (GOC-in-C) of First Canadian Army on 6 April 1942 it marked the culmination of almost three decades of military service to Canada. After a stint as head of the National Research Council in the late 1930s McNaughton returned to uniformed service in 1939 first as GOC of 1st Canadian Infantry Division and then as commander of 1st Canadian Corps. Serving in England McNaughton was responsible for both training the growing Canadian army and for representing the needs and interests of the army to Canadian politicians and British leaders. When

he was relieved of command of First Canadian Army at the end of 1943 there were two principal reasons: his disagreement with the Canadian government over the splitting of the Army, which would allow 1 Canadian Corps to gain battle experience in Italy while at the same time demonstrating Canada's resolve in the conduct of the war, and his miscues as the head of an army sized formation during a major field exercise in England earlier that year.

McNaughton did not seem able or willing during 1943 to accept Ottawa's decision that it was in Canada's best interests to send a corps to the Mediterranean theatre. Rather, the nationalistic general saw the splitting of the Canadian army as blow to Canadian prestige. This situation, and other disagreements with political leaders and bureaucrats, suggest that McNaughton could be prone to seeing things his own way regardless of what the government wanted.<sup>13</sup> His actual falling out over the despatch of 1 Corps to Italy left him in clear opposition to confirmed government policy. He might have weathered these debates but for his ineffectiveness as commander of First Canadian Army.

McNaughton's ability as a battlefield commander had been a concern since 1941. General Sir Alan Brooke, the British chief of the imperial general staff (CIGS) cast a critical eye on all senior commanders and was not afraid of culling those whom he thought incapable of their tasks.<sup>14</sup> Brooke had started to question McNaughton's effectiveness as early as April 1941 when he watched an exercise commanded by McNaughton: "Rather depressed at the standard of training and efficiency of the Canadian Divisional and Brigade Commanders." "Unfortunately as long as MacNaughton [sic] commanded the Corps there is not much chance for improvement. He could not see

the deficiency in training and was no judge of the qualities required of a Commander."<sup>15</sup> McNaughton's training programme did not include subunit or unit training and as a result leaders at those levels had no chance to develop their skills in doing quick estimates and hasty attacks.<sup>16</sup> McNaughton "lacked the required qualities of command."<sup>17</sup>

McNaughton's first and only experience where he actually commanded First Canadian Army in the field took place in 1943. Exercise Spartan has been well documented and allows us to look specifically at McNaughton's personal role during these large manoeuvres. Prior to the exercise he decided to include the fledgling 2 Canadian Corps in his three corps force even though it had never exercised even on its own. McNaughton's biographer views this decision as well reasoned, the general feeling that the learning opportunities would more than offset any teething problems.<sup>18</sup> Historian Jack English on the other hand calls the value of 2 Corps' participation "questionable."<sup>19</sup>

During the exercise the real weak link turned out to be McNaughton himself. He has been criticized, particularly by English, for his decision and counter-decision to pass 2 Corps through the rear area of 1 Corps; he seemed to have no sense of the possible catastrophe of such a manoeuvre. English also criticizes the general for being all too ready to become engrossed by technical details, citing McNaughton's decision to visit bridging operations rather than remain focused on army level matters.<sup>20</sup>

The full extent of McNaughton's difficulties as a commander are apparent in eyewitness accounts which cite periods of indecision, orders issued and rescinded, trips forward for insignificant reasons, and daily instructions transmitted so late that it was virtually impossible for

subordinate formations to adequately prepare for the next day's action.<sup>21</sup> Brooke was in McNaughton's HQ, just as the Canadian was cancelling 2 Corps' move across 1 Corps' rear.<sup>22</sup> After seeing McNaughton in action Brooke recorded: "He does not know how to begin to cope with the job and is tying his force up into the most awful muddle!" "I felt that I could not accept the responsibility of allowing the Canadian Army to go into action under his orders." This level of detail is exactly the precision which historians should strive to find and use if we want to really begin to understand what commanders thought, said, and did as they attempted to command.

Fate led to the political/military and operational challenges which confronted the general at virtually the same time.<sup>23</sup> Always acknowledged as a popular leader McNaughton had nonetheless failed on at least two counts within our model.

A junior officer in the Great War, H.D.G. "Harry" Crerar remained in uniform becoming known as Canada's pre-eminent interwar staff officer. Rising to CGS in the early war years he developed and subsequently gained government approval for the structure of the Canadian Army. In December 1941 he moved to England to command 2nd Canadian Infantry Division, taking command of 1 Canadian Corps in April 1942. He took that corps to Italy at the end of 1943 and then returned to England replacing McNaughton as Army commander. He commanded the Army during the entire campaign in North West Europe except for two periods of illness.

Crerar had an ability to sense the political direction of the government and then factor with it the related military and international considerations.<sup>24</sup> During his time as CGS he provided advice on three major issues: the implementation of the National Resources Mobilization

Act; the creation of a five division army in Britain along side a robust domestic defence force; and the decision to despatch troops to Hong Kong.<sup>25</sup> In the latter circumstance Crerar had examined the defence of Imperial interests in the Pacific as part of his year at the Imperial Defence College in 1934 and subsequently stayed abreast of issues while director of military operations and intelligence in Ottawa.<sup>26</sup> In 1941 he did a detailed reassessment: he did not dismiss the risks, but based his advice on strategic level intelligence.<sup>27</sup> Once the government accepted the request Crerar examined the tactical and technical aspects of the matter. Concluding it to be a relatively low risk task

he approved the use of two battalions then doing garrison duty elsewhere, thus minimizing any impact on the raising of 4th Canadian Division which was going on at the same time.<sup>28</sup> In hindsight Hong Kong was not a low risk situation, but the British and the Americans, both of whom had long experience in the region, were caught similarly unprepared by the "magnitude of Japanese irrationality."<sup>29</sup>

The other half of Crerar's war involved his time as corps and army commander. Many criticisms have been heaped on his performance. Some have to do with his personality and others are related to the fact that like McNaughton he was caught between being a field commander and a national commander, something his



**Lieutenant-General H.D.G. "Harry" Crerar succeeded McNaughton and led First Canadian Army until the end of the war.**

British superiors and particularly Montgomery could not seem to accept.<sup>30</sup> Crerar was as determined a nationalist as McNaughton, but that he used "a more balanced approach" ensuring that he maintained good relations while also exercising his prerogative a senior Canadian.<sup>31</sup>

Crerar got into two flaps early on as Army commander. On his first day in Normandy he became embroiled in an argument with his immediate subordinate Lieutenant-General J.T. Crocker of 1 British Corps. After Montgomery's intercession they smoothed over the issue and got on well until Crocker's corps left First Canadian Army the following March.<sup>32</sup> Crerar fell afoul of Monty by later attending a Canadian ceremony at Dieppe, which conflicted with a

conference called by Montgomery. While C.P. Stacey believes the conference was of little value, Montgomery could not accept that Crerar's presence at Dieppe with 2nd Canadian Infantry Division was of more importance to the Canadian national commander. Crerar refused to back down and threatened to take the matter to higher authorities. To his credit, Montgomery sent a written apology.

While Brooke's biographer indicates that the CIGS was happy to see Crerar, a friend and colleague since the First War, take over from McNaughton,<sup>33</sup> Montgomery was apparently more cautious. Reporting to Brooke at the end of 1943 he said: "The more I think of Harry Crerar

the more I am convinced that he is quite unfit to command an army in the field at present...he wants a lot of teaching; I taught him about training; Oliver Leese [the Commander of Eighth Army in Italy at that time] will have to teach him the practical side of war."<sup>34</sup> At the end of July 1944 Montgomery was again reporting to Brooke on Crerar's progress, this time after the Crocker incident:

fighting his first battle and it is the first appearance in history of a Canadian Army H.Q. He is desperately anxious that it should succeed. He is so anxious that he worries himself all day!!

Montgomery's biographer concludes that "Crerar's naïveté about battle

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was something Monty felt he could cure...<sup>35</sup> We are left to assume that while Crerar was not a shining light he was not so bad that he needed replacing as had McNaughton.

These comments were much different than those which Monty and others had made in 1942 and 1943. Speaking of Crerar's Beaver exercises run in early 1942 when he was replacing McNaughton as corps commander, the British general found them to be "logical and progressive." During this same period Montgomery made the rounds of Canadian formations and units and produced his list of those who should be relieved. Crerar was given the task and got on with it.<sup>36</sup> Shortly after, Montgomery recorded praise for Crerar at the end of the Canadian's first test as a corps commander in Exercise Tiger in May 1942. "You did splendidly ... when I say you did well I mean it." At the same time Monty did not report any issues to Brooke, a technique he used often when displeased with subordinates.<sup>37</sup> The next year, Brooke, Montgomery and Paget also noted Crerar's abilities during exercise Spartan. Crerar's personal development and training plan for the corps paid off, Brooke noted that "Crerar had 'improved the corps out of all recognition.'"<sup>38</sup>

Lieutenant-General Sir Brian Horrocks, Britain's most successful and respected corps commander, was attached to First Canadian Army for Operation Veritable in the Rhineland and came to respect Crerar during the fighting.

[Crerar] was always very well-informed because, in spite of the bad weather, he made constant flights over the battlefield in a small observation aircraft...I found myself getting very tired and irritable. But Crerar bore with me patiently.<sup>39</sup>

...Crerar... has always been much underrated, largely because he was

the exact opposite to Montgomery. He hated publicity, but was full of common sense and always prepared to listen to the views of his subordinate commanders.<sup>40</sup>

Horrocks was equally complimentary about the extensive Canadian build-up and deception plan for the operation.<sup>41</sup> Horrocks was not the only one to notice. Eisenhower offered praise that Crerar had commanded the largest force ever grouped under a Canadian general: "It speaks volumes for your skill and determination."<sup>42</sup> Terry Copp commented that while Crerar was not close to operations, in his role as army commander "he managed a highly effective staff that proved capable of meeting the most difficult challenges."<sup>43</sup> British officers posted to Crerar headquarters after D Day came to recognize that Crerar's staff "were an outstanding group of men who could hold their own with any army HQ under Eisenhower's command."<sup>44</sup> We can perhaps presume that after six months in operations Crerar had settled down to the business of running an army.

Canadian biographies and memoirs present a different, perhaps more personality driven, view. Dominick Graham, Simond's biographer, wrote that during the opening phases of the fall 1944 Scheldt campaign "Crerar had shown no initiative. A plodding man who had not been given a positive order his response to Montgomery's call to mask the lesser ports and get on with the Scheldt was not dynamic."<sup>45</sup>

Major-General George Kitching, who had been a senior staff officer and divisional commander under Simonds, called Crerar a kind but uninspiring commander, who in 1943 and early 1944 had become increasingly jealous of the younger Simonds.<sup>46</sup> Kitching suggests that this jealousy had begun even earlier when in 1942 Simonds, then a staff

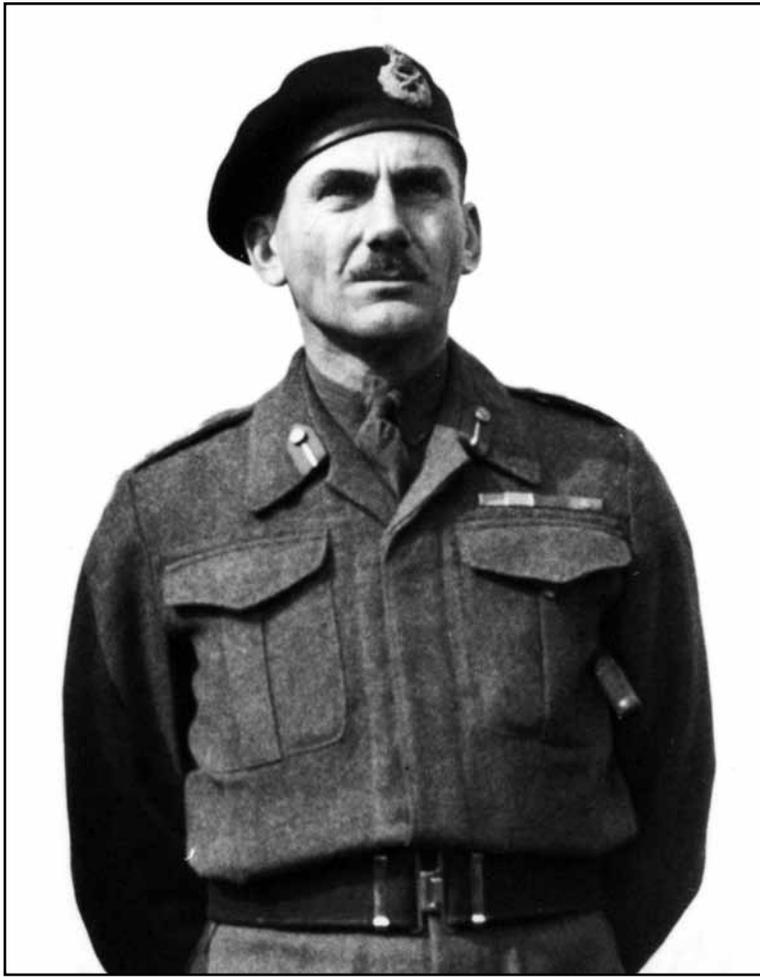
officer, was the "brain" behind Crerar's success in England.<sup>47</sup> Despite this criticism Kitching reports that Crerar was "kindness itself" when offering moral support after Kitching had been sacked in July 1944 by Simonds.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Crerar used a "considered" approach when replacing Major-General Dan Spry as head of 3rd Canadian Infantry Division. Simonds insisted that Spry be replaced after poor performance in the Hochwald. Crerar, as he had done in other cases, orchestrated the move so that it would achieve the desired effect with minimum impact on the man.<sup>49</sup> In selecting the new GOC of 5th Canadian Armoured Division in early 1944, Crerar listened to what others had to say and amended his choice, selecting Brigadier B.M. Hoffmeister. Then, in announcing the job to Hoffmeister he met the man at a set of map coordinates, shook hands and sat down for a chat. This does not represent a standoffish leadership style.<sup>50</sup> From these examples it can be seen that Crerar was ready to reward and replace. That he did so in a careful and quiet way, compared to the more sensational Montgomery and Simonds, "obscured his willingness" to do so.<sup>51</sup>

By the end of 1944 Crerar had returned from a bout of dysentery and was in charge of an army that had grown to close to half a million men with several British and allied divisions under his command. Crerar was well suited for the task: "Few commanders were as qualified to handle an operation of such complexity – and precariousness."<sup>52</sup> Indeed, as the battle began to go wrong Crerar was obliged to make a decision about whether he would throw support behind Horrocks should Simonds not achieve the anticipated advance. This has been described as a "threat" to Simonds,<sup>53</sup> but clearly Crerar was stating the obvious. He had two axes of advance within his sector and if one failed

he would logically reinforce the other. Ultimately he would place Simonds in the van in an assault through the Hochwald.<sup>54</sup>

Paul Dickson's PhD thesis on Crerar, "The Limits of Professionalism," offers some additional perspectives.<sup>55</sup> For example, Crerar's lack of operational activity and apparent attention to paperwork while commanding 1 Canadian Corps briefly in Italy can be explained, says Dickson, first because the corps was not in the line for most of the time Crerar was in command and also by the fact that Crerar had a new brigadier-general staff and was thus forced to take on more of the day to day coordination of corps activities than he might normally have done.<sup>56</sup> Dickson

reports how Crerar matured as a corps commander shaping his staff by juggling between giving them some leeway and lecturing them in something of a teacher-student manner.<sup>57</sup> Crerar's suggestion that Italian operations bore some resemblance to Great War conditions was misinterpreted by those ignorant of the mobile operations conducted in the closing stages of that war. "Crerar was not attempting to force thinking towards rigid trench warfare, but towards the flexible but coordinated strengths of [1918 mobile] doctrine."<sup>58</sup> Crerar went on to use similar tactics in the Rhineland battle, employing counter battery techniques based on proven tactics from 1917-18, and also instituting "pepper-pot"



**Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds briefly commanded First Canadian Army during the fall of 1944 when Crerar required hospitalization.**

artillery concentrations which he had developed in Italy and which Dickson has not found used by other armies.<sup>59</sup> Dickson concludes that while at 1 Canadian Corps Crerar "steadily immersed himself in the practice of command... To his credit, he proved to be flexible and open to new ideas. The inclusive nature of his professionalism was evident as he absorbed and implemented training policy and operational developments throughout the Corps."<sup>60</sup>

Crerar may have been criticized but he did seem successful in staff and line appointments. Did he have intellect? Apparently so, if we accept that he was a key player in defence policy formulation and if we acknowledge that he learned enough on the battlefield to gain

the respect of Sir Brian Horrocks. These same examples would also appear to demonstrate a competency of warfighting and of the military-political interface. Did he meet the challenges of leadership? He quietly got on with selecting, developing, and, where necessary, replacing his subordinates. Did he pass the British opinion test? Both Montgomery and Brooke appear to have found him adequate. If not, why did he keep his job during Normandy and go on to command nearly half a million men in the Rhineland?

In reaching this conclusion we must base our assessment on only the barest witness of Crerar's actual performance. What did he do during the Rhineland battles?

We know that he made daily flights over the battlefield and that he commanded the largest army ever put under the control of a Canadian general. Paul Dickson's work has begun to give us detailed insight into the man and his actions, but there are many questions which remain, and which need to be answered if we are to obtain a precise understanding of Harry Crerar's apparent success.

Guy Simonds was the third and last to have command, if temporarily, of First Canadian Army. An acting major when war broke out he advanced at an amazing rate to take command of 2 Canadian Corps in January 1944. Later that year, and again in the spring of 1945, he would replace Crerar when the latter fell ill.

Despite these accomplishments, Simonds had both command and leadership problems in Sicily while leading 1st Canadian Division. Even George Kitching, Simonds' GSO 1, felt that his boss made some tactical errors. Simonds' performance in Sicily has been described as that of a young general who was innovative and daring, but overly rigid in sticking to a plan that might not be working.<sup>61</sup> He would develop a plan himself without input from staff or subordinate COs before issuing orders. This would have had a negative impact on morale. By comparison many British commanders within Eighth Army were less formal and more collaborative.<sup>62</sup> Admittedly, Simonds was under considerable stress: this was his first time in command in battle, with Canadian and British seniors watching and testing him.<sup>63</sup>

From Normandy to the Rhineland Simonds led both corps and army. In doing so he has been described as "tough, young, smart ruthless and intolerant of inefficiency."<sup>64</sup> Early on, to solve the problems of cracking through the Germans south of Caen, his "fertile mind conjured up a hat full of tricks, many of them untried."<sup>65</sup> In the Scheldt campaign, he is again credited with a brilliant solution, which he had to push forward with determination until his seniors accepted it.<sup>66</sup> Dickson, though a proponent of Crerar, concludes, that Simonds did well in replacing his superior: "by most accounts, Simonds' assumption of command reinvigorated the army HQ; where Crerar managed, Simonds commanded."<sup>67</sup>

English believes that Simonds' policy directives "reflected originality, clarity and completeness."<sup>68</sup> Similarly, Copp says "Simonds was an innovative leader who approached each operation in a problem solving mode." The general "did not hesitate to modify...doctrine and improvise new methods."<sup>69</sup> While not free from

failures, Simonds was very capable in exploiting the strengths of the fighting arms, but, says English, he did have to use a directive approach when working with less capable subordinate commanders. One could conclude that Simonds was forced into a command style that was skewed towards autocracy by presence of subordinates who were in need of being led.

Terry Copp's *The Brigade* gives us a balanced view of the young Canadian citing the general's own chief of staff, Brigadier N.E. Roger, who appreciated Simonds' ability to reduce a problem to the essential, establish a "clear-cut objective" and issue direction in "simple and direct terms."<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, Simonds seemed to possess "overwhelming self-confidence and a degree of arrogance which did not encourage expressions of dissent. Simonds did not attempt to lead; he sought only to command."<sup>71</sup> On the matter of errors during Operation Spring, Copp feels that Simonds acted properly based on the fragmentary information he had available: "He was wrong but this was not an unreasonable decision."<sup>72</sup> Moreover, Copp says that while Simonds' Operation Spring was a failure the general took the hard lessons from it and applied them effectively in Operation Totalize. This "demonstrate[d] that Simonds could learn and grow as a corps commander."<sup>73</sup> Looking at a tough and inflexible reinforcement reception programme, intended to minimize immediate casualties among new soldiers, Copp records an empathetic Simonds: "I fully appreciate...that Commanding Officers have had little time to think about things other than the battle in which they are engaged."<sup>74</sup>

Both Horrocks and Montgomery spoke highly of Simonds. Montgomery recorded: "The Canadian Army produced only one general fit to hold high command in the Second

World War - Guy Simonds."<sup>75</sup> To read just this statement would suggest, perhaps, that Monty found no fault with the young Canadian, but this was not the case. Having earlier overturned Simonds' decision to sack a brigadier in Italy, Montgomery wrote: "Simmonds [sic] is a young and very inexperienced Divisional general and has much to learn about command."<sup>76</sup> Later, in France and Germany, Horrocks found him to be a "first-class commander with a most original brain and full of initiative."<sup>77</sup>

Canadian biographies and memoirs carry two themes: innovative and hard driving commander; cold and uninspiring leader. Major-General Harry Foster's comments are indicative.

He had that amazing ability of being able to analyze any given situation swiftly and accurately, cutting through irrelevancies to the heart of the problem, then making up his mind. His orders were always clear, concise – straight to the point. But he was a hard man to work for.

The performance standards and expectations he set for his subordinate commanders were so high it was impossible to satisfy him. ...I tried to talk to him privately as a friend about the way he ran roughshod over one of my own brigadiers and a regimental commander. He seemed genuinely surprised. "Somebody had to speak to them, Harry. I did it because you didn't."<sup>78</sup>

Indeed, Simonds was not even above sacking his protégé George Kitching when the latter proved incapable of running 4th Armoured Division in Normandy.<sup>79</sup> Despite this Kitching remained a believer in Simonds, calling him "a first-class commander" who reached "the top rank" amongst his peers. Kitching took pains to point out Simonds'




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**By the criteria set out in this article, Crerar rates as Canada's best senior commander. He got on well in and with Ottawa, had a firm understanding of the military profession, displayed an ability to manage large, complex organizations and battles and employed a command style that earned the respect of his fellow commanders.**

**This photo shows the senior officers of First Canadian Army photographed at the end of the war. (l. to r. - seated) H.S. Maczek, G.G. Simonds, H.D.G. Crerar, C. Foulkes, B.M. Hoffmeister; (standing) R.H. Keebler, A.B. Matthews, H.W. Foster, R.W. Moncel, S.B. Rawlins.**

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reservation and shyness, often seen as aloofness while in fact friends knew him to be "warm and generous."<sup>80</sup> Perhaps these traits influenced him to keep on Major-General Rod Keller in Normandy; here he was not prepared to sack one of his subordinates despite the concerns of his seniors.<sup>81</sup> But more often Simonds rubbed the wrong way. Major-General Bert Hoffmeister, arguably Canada's best division commander, did not enjoy working for Simonds. "[Hoffmeister] found Simonds rigid, fond of calling commanders back for direction, less likely to delegate responsibility to subordinate commanders and

abrupt." Personal relations between the two were "not good." "Simonds used fear; Hoffmeister built teams."<sup>82</sup>

In 1946 Simonds set down his own retrospective analysis of Operation Spring. He wrote with conviction that "non-observance of [a number of] tactical measures was in my opinion the cause of the failure ... in operation 'SPRING.'"<sup>83</sup> His conclusion was cautious:

I would prefer to make no statement on the subject for I dislike even suggesting criticism of those who lost their lives, but if a statement is required from me as a matter of

record, I consider that the losses were unnecessarily heavy and the results achieved disappointing. Such losses were not inherent in the plan nor in its intended execution.<sup>84</sup>

The sorts of "policy in the tactical handling of troops and in administration generally" that Simonds wanted he had described personally to officers of 3rd Canadian Infantry Division and 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade when those formations joined the Corps on 16 July 1944.<sup>85</sup> While there is some discussion of tactical doctrine the tone of the address is akin to a

commander giving his subordinates a refresher on what to expect. That Simonds took the time to have this sort of "chat" is an indication of the importance he placed on being a visible and proactive commander. Conversely, we see little humanity in Simonds in telling officers who had just come out of some hard fighting that he was prepared to incur up to 70 per cent casualties if that meant winning a battle. Copp believes that this callous approach "must have met with a mixed reception," particularly to men who were not new to Normandy, but new to Simonds' corps.<sup>86</sup>

How then should we measure Simonds' success as a commander? It seems clear that he had a considerable intellect and that he applied it to well developed effect in the conduct of large scale military operations. His innovations, both technical and tactical, in France and Belgium remain examples of what generals are supposed to do: find ways to resolve battlefield impasses. Commander of the army on only two occasions and for limited periods he did not have to deal in any significant way with the Canadian government and thus we cannot make any conclusions about his success in this area. It is worth noting, however, that after the war he was not selected as CGS, apparently at Crerar's suggestion.<sup>87</sup> When he did assume that appointment in 1951 his tenure while of reasonable length was not smooth.

While Simonds was a brilliant master of the military art, he was less than perfect as a leader. His run-ins with subordinates, and superiors, suggest that he was not particularly comfortable in the sorts of interpersonal relationships required of high command. He knew what he was looking for in his followers, but got it more by direction and intimidation than by cooperation and collaboration. This may well have been a direct result of the relative

inexperience of those over whom he was given command. His job, after all, was not to be popular but to help win the war while getting as many as possible of those for whom he was responsible back to Canada in one piece.

Was Simonds a successful commander? Yes, but perhaps only in the circumstances. As Terry Copp concludes, "Simonds lacked the human touch that distinguishes great leaders, but no other corps commander displayed such technical competence and flexibility."<sup>88</sup>

Two questions were asked at the beginning of this article: was it right to apply a three faceted measure of success when assessing senior military commanders; and, if yes, which of the three army commanders had been the most successful?

It seems clear that Andy McNaughton – while a man of great intellect and personal popularity – was not suited either to command (and manage) a large and complex field army, or to be that army's spokesman when dealing with the national government in Ottawa.

Guy Simonds was never faced, in a protracted way, with that political challenge, although when his time came in the 1950s he experienced mixed success. As a battlefield manager he was the best Canada produced and was apparently as good as any the British could field. As one charged with the development of an effective working relationship with his subordinates he seemed able to direct with cold precision, but was generally unable or unwilling to lead with a human touch. He was not a failed commander, but he was less than ideal.

This leaves Harry Crerar who got on well in and with Ottawa, had a firm understanding of the military profession, displayed an ability to manage large complex organizations and battles and employed a command style that earned the respect of

Horrocks, the pre-eminent British corps commander. Least known of our three generals Crerar seems, nonetheless, to have been the most effective of the three commanders when our criteria for success are applied.

Terry Copp and others remind us that battle breaks down into a series of small unique combats.<sup>89</sup> If, then, soldiers do not fight for their nation or regiment, but rather for those with whom they serve, is it not reasonable to modify this model to suggest that commanders do not command their armies directly, but rather they influence and direct a small group of immediate subordinates through whom the commander's intent is, hopefully, successfully transmitted. If this is so, then surely it leaves us with important questions for the accurate measurement of command effectiveness and a commander's success. We are a long way from a complete picture of success in high command.

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## Notes

1. I had originally intended to include two other officers, Lieutenant-Generals E.L.M. Burns and C. Foulkes, in this list. Both were corps commanders and thus might be included in this senior command group. This was a selection which I learned, subsequent to having composed these lines, was shared by Charles Stacey. The text of his Thompson Lecture at the Royal Military College was published: "Canadian Leaders of the Second World War," *Canadian Historical Review* 66, no.1 (March 1985), pp.64-72.
2. Archibald Wavell, *Generals and Generalship: The Lees Knowles Lectures Cambridge, 1939* (London: Penguin, 1941), pp.14-5.
3. Wavell, p.15.
4. Wavell, pp.15-23.
5. Wavell, pp.46-7.
6. Wavell, pp.57-62.
7. G.G. Simonds, "Essential Qualities in the Leader" Annexure to letter GOC, 19 Feb 44." This reproduction was provided to newly-promoted brigadier-generals and commodores during a lecture by Terry Copp at the Canadian Forces College in October 2000.
8. Simonds, "Essential Qualities," p.1.
9. Simonds, "Essential Qualities," p.2.

10. Martin van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p.6.
11. van Creveld, p.12.
12. van Creveld, p.13.
13. These include Lester Pearson, *Mike: The Memoirs of the Right Honourable Lester B. Pearson, Volume I: 1897-1948* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972); C.P. Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict: A History of Canadian External Policies; Volume 2: 1921-1948 – The Mackenzie King Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981); John English, *Shadow of Heaven: The Life of Lester Pearson, Volume One: 1897-1948* (Toronto: Lester and Orphen Denys, 1989).
14. David Fraser, *Alanbrooke* (London: Collins, 1982), p.187.
15. Fraser, p.188.
16. Douglas Delaney, *The Soldiers' General: Bert Hoffmeister at War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), pp.30, 39.
17. Fraser, p.189.
18. John Sweetenham, *McNaughton Vol.2* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1969), p.274.
19. J.A. English, *The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign: A Study in the Failure of High Command* (New York: Praeger, 1991), p.144.
20. Both of these *faux pas* are described in some detail, see English pp.145-6.
21. John N. Rickard, "The Test of Command: McNaughton and Exercise 'Spartan,' 4-12 March 1943," *Canadian Military History* 8, no.3 (Summer 1999), pp.22-38. See also Dickson, p.218.
22. Rickard, p.30.
23. Sweetenham, p.316.
24. J.L. Granatstein, *The Generals: the Canadian Army's Senior Commander in the second World War* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1993), p.89.
25. Granatstein, *The Generals*, pp.95-9.
26. Paul Dickson, "Crerar and the Decision to Garrison Hong Kong," *Canadian Military History* 3, no.1 (Spring 1994), pp.98-101.
27. Dickson, "Crerar and...Hong Kong," pp.104-5.
28. Dickson, "Crerar and...Hong Kong," pp.105-6.
29. Dickson, "Crerar and...Hong Kong," p.108.
30. Terry Copp, *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p.114.
31. Paul Dickson, *A Thoroughly Canadian General: A Biography of General H.D.G. Crerar* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), p.189.
32. C.P. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign: Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-1945* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1966), pp.196-8. See also J.A. English, 183, 194. English is much more critical of Crerar saying that he lacked judgement or was naïve.
33. Fraser, p.442.
34. Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield 1942-1944* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1983), p.476.
35. Hamilton, pp.780-1.
36. Delaney, pp.39-40.
37. Dickson, *Crerar*, p.195.
38. Dickson, *Crerar*, p.217.
39. Brian Horrocks, *Corps Commander* (Toronto: Griffin House, 1977), p.182.
40. Brian Horrocks, *A Full Life* (London: Collins, 1960), p.253.
41. Horrocks, *Corps Commander*, pp.177-9.
42. Dickson, *Crerar*, p.381.
43. Terry Copp, *Cinderella Army: The Canadians in Northwest Europe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), p.290.
44. Copp, *Fields of Fire*, p.116.
45. Graham, p.179.
46. George Kitching, *Mud and Green Fields: The Memoirs of Major General George Kitching* (Langley, B.C.: Battleline Books, 1996), 178.
47. Kitching, *Mud and Green Fields*, p.123.
48. Kitching, *Mud and Green Fields*, p.229.
49. Dickson, *Crerar*, pp.402-3.
50. Delaney, *Hoffmeister*, pp.120-1.
51. Dickson, *Crerar*, pp.191.
52. Dennis and Shelagh Whitaker, *Rhineland: The Battle to End the War* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1989), p.32.
53. Whitaker, pp.220-1.
54. Dickson *Crerar*, pp.390-2.
55. Paul Dickson, "The Limits of Professionalism: General H.D.G. Crerar and the Canadian Army, 1914-1944," PhD Thesis, University of Guelph, 1993.
56. Dickson, "Limits," pp.460-4.
57. Dickson, *Crerar*, p.190.
58. Dickson, "Limits," pp.465-6.
59. Dickson, *Crerar*, p.387.
60. Dickson, "Limits," p.484.
61. D.G. Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers: the Canadians in Italy, 1943-1945* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1991), p.81.
62. Delaney, pp.176-7.
63. Dancocks, pp.96-7.
64. Denis Whitaker and Shelagh Whitaker, *Victory at Falaise: The Soldiers' Story* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2000), p.108.
65. Whitaker and Whitaker, *Victory at Falaise*, p.110.
66. Denis Whitaker and Shelagh Whitaker, *Tug of War: The Canadian Victory that Opened Antwerp* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1984), pp.108-117.
67. Dickson, *Crerar*, pp.354-5.
68. English, pp.237-8.
69. Copp, *Cinderella Army*, p.10.
70. Terry Copp, *The Brigade: The Fifth Canadian Infantry Brigade, 1939-1945* (Stoney Creek, ON: Fortress Publications 1992).
71. Copp, *The Brigade*, p.46. See also Copp *Fields of Fire*, p.117.
72. Copp, *The Brigade*, p.85.
73. Copp, *Fields of Fire*, pp.182-3.
74. Copp, *The Brigade*, p.169.
75. Hamilton, p.507.
76. Hamilton, p.341.
77. Horrocks, *A Full Life*, p.254.
78. Tony Foster, *Meeting of Generals* (Toronto: Methuen, 1986), p.340.
79. Kitching, *Mud and Green Fields*, pp.118-9.
80. George Kitching, "General Guy Simonds – In Appreciation," *Canadian Defence Quarterly* 4, no.2 (Autumn 1974), pp.9-10.
81. Copp, *Fields of Fire*, p.115.
82. Delaney, pp.123, 224-5.
83. G.G. Simonds, "Operation 'Spring,'" *Canadian Military History* 1, nos.1&2 (Autumn, 1992), p.67.
84. Simonds, "Spring," p.68.
85. G.G. Simonds, "General Simonds Speaks: Canadian Battle Doctrine in Normandy," *Canadian Military History* 8, no.2 (Spring 1999), pp.69-80.
86. Copp, *Fields of Fire*, p.118.
87. Dickson, *Crerar*, p.433. It should be remembered that the job did not go to Crerar either, but rather to Charles Foulkes who went on to become the chairman of the chiefs of staff committee.
88. Copp, *Cinderella Army*, p.289.
89. Terry Copp in Whitaker, *Victory at Falaise*, p.304.

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