

**Corps Commanders  
Five British and Canadian Generals at War, 1939-45**

*Douglas E. Delaney*



**UBC**Press · Vancouver · Toronto

Sample Material © 2011 UBC Press

STUDIES IN CANADIAN MILITARY HISTORY

*Series editor: Dean F. Oliver, Canadian War Museum*

The Canadian War Museum, Canada's national museum of military history, has a three-fold mandate: to remember, to preserve, and to educate. Studies in Canadian Military History, published by UBC Press in association with the Museum, extends this mandate by presenting the best of contemporary scholarship to provide new insights into all aspects of Canadian military history, from earliest times to recent events. The work of a new generation of scholars is especially encouraged, and the books employ a variety of approaches – cultural, social, intellectual, economic, political, and comparative – to investigate gaps in the existing historiography. The books in the series feed immediately into future exhibitions, programs, and outreach efforts by the Canadian War Museum. A list of the titles in the series appears at the end of the book.



# Contents

List of Illustrations / ix

Acknowledgments / xi

Foreword / xiii

Abbreviations / xv

Introduction: Who, How, and the Common Ground / 1

1 The Actor: Lieutenant-General Sir Brian Horrocks / 10

2 Wit in Want of Will: Lieutenant-General E.L.M. Burns / 59

3 The Quiet Gentleman: General Sir John Crocker / 122

4 Wit with Will to Spare: Lieutenant-General Guy Granville Simonds / 189

5 The Master Bureaucrat: General Charles Foulkes / 255

Observations and Conclusions / 296

Notes / 306

Bibliography / 356

Index / 364

# Illustrations

## FIGURE

- 1 British and Canadian corps headquarters, 1943-45 / 7

## MAPS

- 1 The battle of Alam Halfa / 21
- 2 Operation Veritable, 8-14 February 1945 / 44
- 3 Breaking the Gustav and Hitler Lines / 82
- 4 The battle for Rome / 86
- 5 Advance to the Gothic Line / 112
- 6 Breaking the Gothic Line / 114
- 7 Plan of 9th Corps' attack on Fondouk / 136
- 8 The capture of Caen, 8-9 July 1944 / 149
- 9 Le Havre: Operation Astonia, 10-12 September 1944 / 161
- 10 The battle of Bourguébus ridge, 18-21 July 1944 / 220
- 11 Verrières ridge–Tilly-la-Campagne, 25 July 1944 / 225
- 12 Operation Totalize, 7-10 August 1944 / 230
- 13 Operation Tractable, 14-16 August 1944 / 235
- 14 The Scheldt battles, October-November 1944 / 240
- 15 Operation Blockbuster, 22 February-10 March 1945 / 253
- 16 From the Montone to the Senio, 2 December 1944 to 5 January 1945 / 276
- 17 The western Netherlands, 2-25 April 1945 / 286

## PHOTOGRAPHS

- General Brian Horrocks returns to duty / 173
- Lieutenant-General Charles Foulkes with Lieutenant-Colonel Logan Vencta / 174
- The Operation Veritable team / 175
- Brigadier John Rockingham and Lieutenant-General Brian Horrocks / 176

- Lieutenant-General Sir Oliver Leese speaking with Regimental Sergeant Major G.D. Gilpin / 176
- King George VI and “Tommy” Burns / 177
- Foulkes and his aide-de-camp, Lieutenant E.C. Argue / 178
- Burns and his Brigadier General Staff, Nick McCarter / 178
- Burns in his planning van / 179
- The senior leadership of the First Canadian Army / 180-81
- Lieutenant-General John Crocker with a visiting Soviet delegation / 180
- Charles Foulkes with his patron and protector, Harry Crerar / 181
- Corps Headquarters from the outside / 182-83
- General Sir John Crocker / 184
- Corps Headquarters from the inside / 185
- Guy Simonds, Field Marshal Montgomery, and Harry Crerar / 186
- Guy Simonds speaking with Lieutenant-Colonel Pat Bogert / 187
- John Crocker speaking with Rod Keller / 188

## Foreword

CORPS COMMANDERS ARE SOME of the forgotten soldiers of the Commonwealth wartime army. There are a plethora of biographies of the top generals, often focusing on their sometimes fraught relations with each other and with their political masters, and just as many studies of life in the front line. But we know little about the men who stood between them. Doug Delaney has already written a fine biography of one Canadian divisional commander, Bert Hoffmeister,<sup>1</sup> and now he looks at five men who commanded one step up.

In the course of the Second World War, the British and Canadian armies underwent the same experience of massive expansion on the basis of a small – or, in the case of the Canadian Permanent Force, tiny – cadre of regular officers and men. This is a book that explains how these armies went about finding a key group of men who could organize and lead them, and the job that these commanders did on the battlefield. Not the least of its merits is that it has shown me one of the shortcomings of my own work. Nearly a decade ago, I published a study of the British Army during the Second World War that made no mention of the Canadian Army. For that omission I now apologize, for Dr. Delaney has demonstrated how wrong I was. The army that landed in Sicily and Italy in 1943 and in Normandy in 1944 was not a *British* army; it was a *British Commonwealth* army in which Canadian divisions and corps fought alongside their British counterparts. That they were able to do so with only a moderate amount of friction owed everything to two things: the Canadian Permanent Force and the militia it trained were organized, trained, and equipped on British lines, and a handful of the very best Canadian regular officers had passed through, and been taught alongside, the best of the British regular officer corps at either the British Army Staff College at Camberley or the Indian Army Staff College at Quetta.

In 1939, the tasks facing the likes of Simonds, Horrocks, and their contemporaries were formidable. Not only was the enemy in front of them, the Germans, intent on causing them problems, but they were surrounded by almost equally intractable difficulties in their own armies. Between 1939 and 1942, the British Commonwealth forces underwent a period of massive expansion that had been largely unplanned before 1939. What was surprising is not that the men at the top made mistakes, and that their armies suffered defeats. That was likely to

happen to any army expanding more than tenfold in the midst of a war. The small cadre of British and Canadian staff-trained officers were one of the keys to explaining how and why the Commonwealth armies eventually overcame these difficulties and went on, not without some further mistakes, to create a force that could defeat the best that the *Wehrmacht* could throw against them. They had gone to Camberley or Quetta as captains and majors when their practical experience was limited to commanding companies and batteries, and some Canadian officers lacked even that command experience. But the Staff College had at least given them the opportunity to think hard about how they might manage and command corps and armies. It was knowledge and understanding that they would put to good use in the war. And, as Delaney points out, by 1944 the system had bedded down sufficiently that even a commander of Foulkes's modest tactical competence could survive.

But *Corps Commanders* does more than just show how the British and Canadian armies shared a common doctrine and forms of organization. Dr. Delaney has also provided answers to one of the most fundamental questions that military historians ought to ask about any army, which is not just who commanded them but how they did so. What were the mechanics that permitted a single man to guide, animate, and control the activities of a corps of one hundred thousand men on a battlefield? They did not do it by sitting in a chateau, content to run their battles from the end of a telephone line. They liked to get well forward to see for themselves. A successful corps commander needed to be clever enough to read the tactical problems in front of him and to devise workable solutions to them. If he was sensible, he left the job of working out the details to his staff, while he personally worked to inspire his subordinates, encouraged those who needed encouragement, and sacked those who could not or would not do the job. The five commanders examined here were men of very different personalities. Horrocks was wonderful with people. Simonds was too cold to win any soldier's heart. Horrocks encouraged his subordinates. Simonds drove his. Both were successful battlefield commanders. Burns neither encouraged nor intimidated people, and ultimately got sacked because of it. But what they, together with Foulkes and Crocker, did have in common were professional and technical skills and intelligence. There was not a Colonel Blimp among them. This is one of the most enlightening books about how generals actually fought battles that you are likely to read.

David French  
Professor Emeritus  
University College London

# Abbreviations

AA & QMG	Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster General
AAI	Allied Armies in Italy
ADC	aide-de-camp
AEAF	Allied Expeditionary Air Forces
AG & QMG	Adjutant General and Quartermaster General
AGRA	Army Group Royal Artillery
armd	armoured
BAOR	British Army of the Rhine
BCD	British Columbia Dragoons
bde	brigade
BGS	Brigadier General Staff
BL	British Library
CCRA	Commander, Corps Royal Artillery
CE	Chief Engineer
CGS	Chief of the General Staff
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
CJWSC	Canadian Junior War Staff Course
CMHQ	Canadian Military Headquarters (London)
CO	commanding officer
Comd	commander
COS	Chief of Staff
coy	company
CRA	Commander Royal Artillery
CRE	Commander Royal Engineers
CSO	Chief Signals Officer
DA & QMG	Deputy Adjutant and Quartermaster General
DHH	Directorate of History and Heritage (National Defence Headquarters)
Div	Division
DMO & I	Director Military Operations and Intelligence
DSO	Distinguished Service Order



dvr	driver
FOO	Forward Observation Officer (artillery)
GOC	General Officer Commanding
GS	General Staff
GSO	General Staff Officer
H & PER	Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment
HE	High Explosive
IDC	Imperial Defence College
instr	instruction
IOR	India Office Records
LAA	Light Anti-Aircraft
LAC	Library and Archives Canada
LHCMA	Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives
mov	move/movement
NCO	non-commissioned officer
NDHQ	National Defence Headquarters (Ottawa)
NPAM	Non-Permanent Active Militia
OO	Operation Order
OP	observation post
ops	operations
PF	Permanent Force
PIAT	Projector, Infantry, Anti-tank
PLDG	4th Princess Louise Dragoon Guards
PPCLI	Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry
psc	Passed Staff College
RAF	Royal Air Force
recce	reconnaissance
REME	Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineering
RMC	Royal Military College (of Canada)
SHAEF	Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force
SP	self-propelled
sqn	squadron
ST	supply and transport
Tac	Tactical Headquarters
TEWT	Tactical Exercise without Troops
tk	tank
TNA	The National Archives (Kew)
USAAF	United States Army Air Forces
WD	War Diary
WO	War Office

## Introduction: Who, How, and the Common Ground

*The great test of an officer who aspires to high command will be his ability to grasp quickly the essentials of a military problem, to decide rapidly what he will do, to make it clear to all concerned what he intends to achieve and how he will do it, and then to see that his subordinate commanders get on with the job ...*

*He must [also] possess a high morale ... Without high morale, and in this will be included confidence, resolution and enthusiasm, he will not be able to stand the strain of battle for long nor will he radiate that confidence so necessary for the inspiration of subordinates.*

– WAR OFFICE, CONDUCT OF WAR

WHO WERE THEY AND how did they fight their battles? These questions are central to this collective biography of five generals who commanded corps in the British and Canadian armies during the Second World War. E.L.M. Burns, Guy Simonds, Charles Foulkes, Sir Brian Horrocks, and Sir John Crocker all moved easily between the national armies of the British Empire, even though the first three were products of the Canadian Permanent Active Militia, or Permanent Force, while the last two had learned their trade in the British and Indian armies. Burns commanded 1st Canadian Corps as part of the British Eighth Army in Italy from March to October 1944, and his replacement, Charles Foulkes, also fought several actions under British command before taking the corps to Northwest Europe, where he spent the remainder of the war with General H.D.G. Crerar's First Canadian Army. Simonds fought his 2nd Canadian Corps in that army, even commanding it in an acting capacity during the battles of the Scheldt Estuary, but not before he had cut his corps' teeth with Miles Dempsey's British Second Army in Normandy. The two Britons, Horrocks and Crocker, each commanded their British corps for a while under First Canadian Army command, Crocker from July 1944 to March 1945, Horrocks during the Rhineland battles of February and March 1945. Both came to the Canadians with battle experience gained in other British armies. Crocker had commanded the 9th Corps with the British First Army in North Africa, and he too had fought the first phases of the Normandy campaign under Dempsey. Before being wounded and returning to action at the head of 30th Corps in the British Second

Army during the summer of 1944, Horrocks had commanded two different corps in Sir Bernard Law Montgomery's Eighth Army during the Western Desert battles of 1942-43. That these five generals could move so easily between the armies of the British Empire suggests that it might also be a good idea to ask *how they learned* their business. Surely, their portability owed much to common training, doctrine, and experience.

We know a little bit about their lives, their learning, and what they did during the war thanks to a few memoirs, operational histories, and biographical studies. Burns and Horrocks both left memoirs and have been the subject of some historical study.<sup>1</sup> Simonds never finished his memoirs, but several scholars have taken to writing biographical works and analyses about him.<sup>2</sup> Very little has been written on either Crocker or Foulkes, although their names pop up here and there in various official histories and operational studies.<sup>3</sup> Generally, however, our knowledge of *who* they were is uneven and we have no in-depth analysis of *how* any of these men exercised command, which Martin Van Crevald defines as “a *function* that has to be exercised, more or less continuously, if the army is to exist and to operate.”<sup>4</sup> Neither do we have a comparative analysis of how a group of British Commonwealth generals learned to organize, train, and direct the personnel and arms in their charge. This book will be the first to connect the *who* and the *how* for a group of British and Canadian corps commanders who had the common experience of serving under Canadian command.

The command *function* of which Van Crevald writes depends largely on the technical and human skills of the commander.<sup>5</sup> He must know his stuff – no great revelation there. Tactical analysis, making timely decisions, conveying clear direction, supervising subordinates: a commander must do these things well if he is to stand a chance of winning battles. A general must also know how to exploit the staff, subordinate commanders, and communications infrastructure that are the apparatus of command. At the same time, he must be able to tap the intangible – to inspire subordinates and staff, to motivate them, or to drive them to work extra hours or to walk extra miles, often in the face of great personal danger. Superlative plans executed by insipid subordinates rarely succeed, so he must enliven them himself or provide them with subordinate commanders who can. For a general, the accumulation of technical skill takes place over decades of staff training, army courses, schemes, and practical experience. Human skills he acquires over a lifetime of dealing with people and learning what makes them tick. Both sets of skills warrant inquiry, and a balance of biography and battle will be necessary to elucidate and explain them. To this end, I have tried to track the development of each corps commander as closely as the available sources would allow, and I have been selective in the battle ac-

tions analyzed. Sufficient resolution of the commander's action in battle is necessary for a reasonable determination of how he got things done; there is not the space, however, for a definitive account of each action. Even so, the following analysis of how five generals acquired and used their skills will offer some useful contrasts in the exercise of command, and it will also reveal something of the armies, and the imperial system, that trained them.<sup>6</sup>

They were a surprisingly eclectic bunch. Brian Horrocks was the lone extrovert of the lot, a skilled operator with acting skills to rival Sir Laurence Olivier's, and capable of winning the hearts of the most hard-bitten soldiers. "Tommy" Burns was the other extreme. Academic and introverted, he wrote widely and brilliantly on military and political affairs, even tried his hand at a romance novel, but he had an uncanny knack for making everyone around him uncomfortable. John Crocker was just as quiet and just as skilled as Burns, but less theoretically minded, and he could relate to people, both in words, when he used them, and in deed. He was also a gentleman of great bravery, honesty, and example. Guy Simonds was equally reticent, relying more on his formidable technical skill, singular focus, and ruthless determination to drive people and get things done. He did not slap many backs. Charles Foulkes had the weakest skills of the group – a man of marginal tactical ability who was hated by most who worked with him – but he was a cutthroat army bureaucrat who, despite handling his division poorly in battle, clawed his way to corps command and made few mistakes once he got there. For a group of white, Anglican forty-somethings, they probably could not have been more different.<sup>7</sup>

And yet they all fit quite readily into the British Commonwealth armies and fought their corps in similar fashion. All three Canadians commanded British formations and served under British army commanders at one time or other, and the two Britons worked for and commanded Canadians as well. That they spoke the same "language" – a common method for solving military problems and for communicating solutions – made such inter-army adjustments relatively simple. All senior army officers of the British Empire learned that "language" at either the British Army Staff College at Camberley or the Indian Army Staff College at Quetta. Their curricula, as Richard Preston pointed out years ago, "permeated" thoroughly the senior ranks of the British, Indian, and Dominion armies.<sup>8</sup> This was done quite deliberately. Common entrance examinations, similar curricula, continuous exchanges of Directing Staff and students, and reserved vacancies for Dominion officers ensured uniformity for the staff colleges and all who passed through their gates.<sup>9</sup> The dividend, as Canadian general A.G.L. McNaughton stated, was that "we have gained the priceless advantage of knowing each other so well, of organizing our forces in the same way, of

writing our orders in identical manner.”<sup>10</sup> British generals like Eric Dorman-Smith agreed: “The ‘common doctrine’ survived ... [w]hich is what we all went to the Staff Colleges to ensure.”<sup>11</sup> No officer in either British or Canadian armies could have expected advancement to senior rank without first qualifying “psc” (Passed Staff College). Canada, for example, sent seventy-five of its army officers to either Camberley or Quetta between 1905 and 1939, and forty-eight of them were still serving at the start of the Second World War.<sup>12</sup> This remaining core of staff-trained officers, which included Burns, Simonds, and Foulkes, all went on to senior rank and were the embryo of the First Canadian Army. They built the brigades, divisions, and corps of the army, and they played a large part in training the staff officers to run them, based largely on what they had learned at Camberley and Quetta.

The comprehensive two-year curriculum that they had studied at the staff colleges was demanding. During the first year, or Junior Division, students mostly mastered “Staff Duties within a Division,” but that was a bit more complex than it sounds.<sup>13</sup> They studied tactics for the attack, the defence, withdrawal, and pursuit.<sup>14</sup> They learned how to conduct appreciations, prepare orders, and communicate those orders in fixed formats that everyone could understand. They learned the proper separation of staff functions within a headquarters: to assist the commander of any formation, “G” staffs tracked operations and intelligence, “A” staffs supervised personnel reinforcements and replacements, and “Q” staffs looked after logistics and administration, including transport.<sup>15</sup> Candidates learned how to complete the full gamut of these staff tasks – everything from writing intelligence assessments to planning road moves. Sometimes they did the work themselves; most of the time, however, students worked in syndicates of four or five students under the tutelage of a lieutenant-colonel on the Directing Staff. Frequently, they conducted map exercises indoors, during which a student could play any part from “an Army Commander to Staff Captain.”<sup>16</sup> Just as frequently, they would go outside to plan attacks, defences, withdrawals, and other operations of war on representative pieces of terrain. These Tactical Exercises without Troops (TEWTs), as they were called, forced the candidates to apply lecture-learning in a more realistic setting, one in which they gained a greater appreciation for the factors of time and space in military operations. Students also engaged in a fair amount of historical study, analyzing past campaigns such as the battle of Waterloo and British operations in Palestine during the First World War.

The Senior Division, or second year of Staff College, focused at a higher level – corps, army, and combined operations.<sup>17</sup> Whereas students in the Junior Division had confined their study mostly to army matters and army branches

(infantry, artillery, cavalry, and service corps), Senior Division students learned a lot more about the Royal Air Force, the Royal Navy, and how these services fit into combined operations. Staff learning in the Senior Division remained practical, however. Students could one day find themselves developing a corps casualty evacuation plan and, on another, preparing a written operation order as a General Staff Officer First Grade (GSO 1) of a division. The Senior Division student also learned how to conduct training – run ranges, plan TEWTs, and organize field exercises. Overall, Camberley and Quetta were less about telling the students how to do things than they were about conveying the method and the structures that could be reasonably applied in any military situation. In other words, students did not learn a one-size-fits-all method for artillery fire planning; they learned instead what British artillery was capable of doing, factors that should be considered when making a fire plan, and the ways in which a fire plan could be conveyed, supervised, and altered. For imperial armies oceans apart, this was critical. Even when wartime exigencies demanded abbreviated staff training, the basic “language” and method stayed the same. The condensed seventeen- to eighteen-week curricula of 1940-45 War Staff Courses were shorn of historical studies and pitched almost entirely to the GSO 3 (captain) level of staff training, but they conveyed much the same material and the efforts to ensure commonality endured, even when staff training became decentralized at a number of different schools.<sup>18</sup> For any given Canadian War Staff Course conducted at Kingston, Ontario, for example, roughly one-third of the Directing Staff came from the British Army.<sup>19</sup>

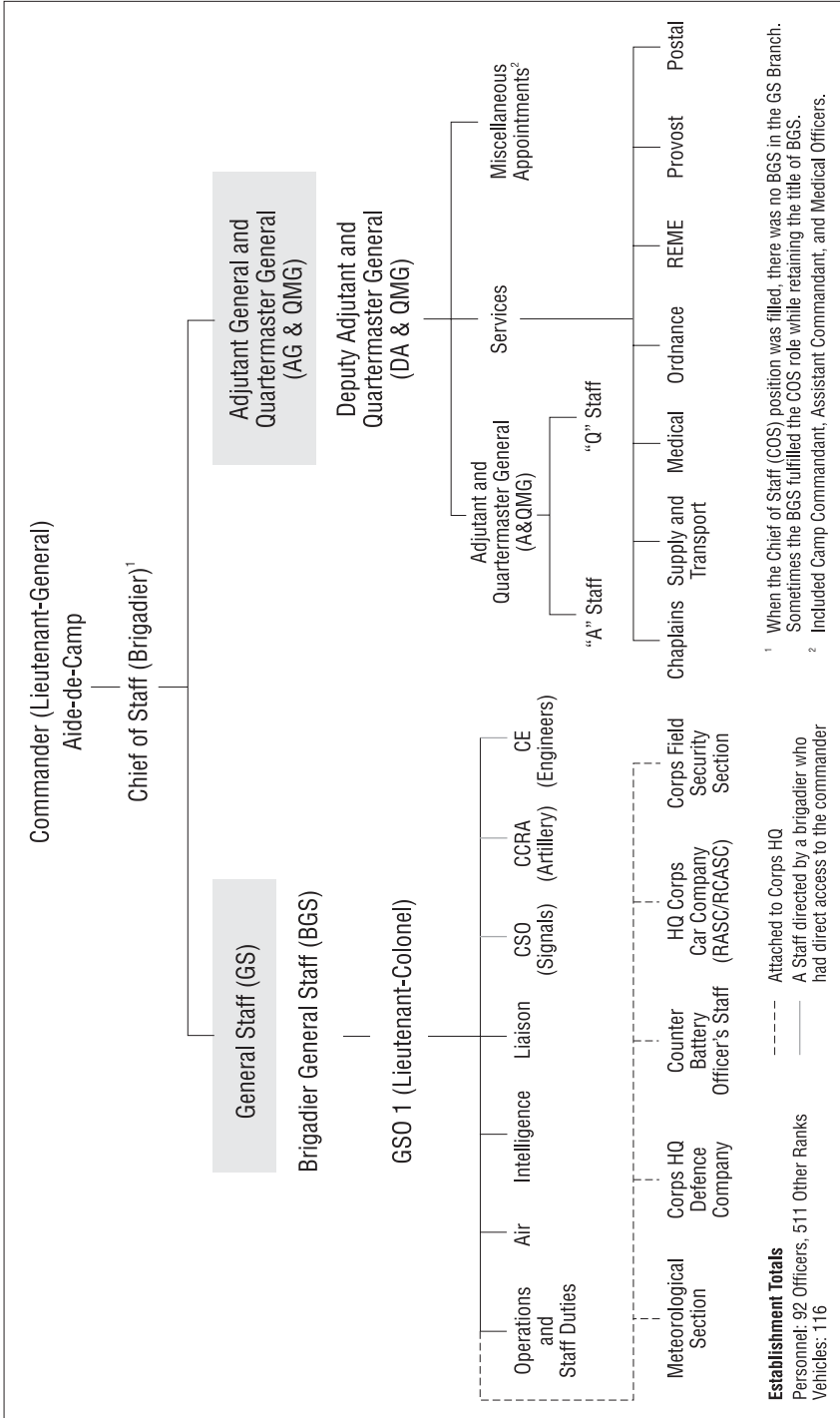
Canada’s willingness to follow the British lead on training, doctrine, and equipment helped. At the 1926 Imperial Conference in London, Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King had reaffirmed Canada’s policy of maintaining conformity with Britain on matters of defence. Not that it meant Canada was willing to defer to Britain on all aspects of defence policy; far from it. In 1937, for example, King insisted that the long-standing periodic exchange of letters between the Canadian Chief of the General Staff (CGS) and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) be revised so that the letters were routed through the Canadian Department of External Affairs.<sup>20</sup> King was happy enough to have his CGS and even his Minister of National Defence discussing rifles, battalion orders of battle, or staff training with their British counterparts, but he did not want them making any commitments or giving tacit approval to war plans that originated in Britain. Canadian generals were just as conscious of national sovereignty concerning the use of Canadian troops in training and in war. As General Officer Commanding (GOC) 1st Canadian Corps, “Andy” McNaughton hit the roof when he heard that elements of the 1st Canadian

Infantry Division had been detached to British formations during a January 1941 exercise.<sup>21</sup> No division of Canadian formations, he insisted, would take place without his consent as the military representative of the Canadian government, a line that his successor as Senior Combatant Officer Overseas maintained, and a line with which British military authorities complied, if somewhat grudgingly at times.

Common doctrine, training, and equipment yielded common organizations, something that applied much more to corps staffs than it did to the composition of the corps themselves. In fact, a corps was not a fixed organization at all. As Brian Horrocks described it, “a corps consist[ed] only of a permanent H.Q. staff, certain administrative echelons and usually some corps artillery regiments.”<sup>22</sup> Corps were organized based on their tasks. To break into the formidable Siegfried Line during Operation Veritable, Horrocks had seven divisions and some 200,000 troops in 30th Corps. A little over two years earlier, however, his 13th Corps had commanded little more than its own headquarters and a salvage unit because there was nothing for it to do after the battle of El Alamein. Typically, though, a corps consisted of the headquarters, two to four divisions,<sup>23</sup> some corps troops,<sup>24</sup> and an Army Group Royal Artillery (AGRA), consisting of one field and three medium regiments to supplement the fire of the divisional artillery organizations. If needed, a corps could count on the fire support of additional AGsRA. Simonds had three of them supporting Operation Totalize in August 1944, and Horrocks had a whopping five for Veritable five months later.<sup>25</sup> The organization and strength of corps really depended on the priorities and roles assigned them by army commanders.

The apparatus for controlling these task-tailored organizations was fairly fixed, however (see Figure 1). The Corps headquarters consisted of two essential parts: a General Staff (GS) branch and an Adjutant General and Quartermaster General (AG & QMG) branch. The GS branch assisted the commander with planning, current operations, and intelligence.<sup>26</sup> To do this, it had functional sub-branches dedicated to operations and staff duties,<sup>27</sup> air support, intelligence, and liaison. The Commander Corps Royal Artillery (CCRA), the Chief Engineer (CE), the Chief Signals Officer (CSO), and their staffs rounded out the GS branch, which consisted of some thirty to thirty-five staff officers in total.

Early in the war, the GS branch functioned under the supervision of the Brigadier General Staff (BGS); by 1943-44, however, most British and Canadian headquarters had adopted the chief-of-staff system, in which one senior staff officer coordinated the work of both the GS and AG & QMG branches. When that happened, the BGS became the Chief of Staff and the GSO 1 assumed the hands-on responsibility of coordinating GS branch activities.<sup>28</sup> As far as matters of personnel, logistics, and administration were concerned, they remained the



**FIGURE 1** British and Canadian corps headquarters, 1943-45. Based on Joint Services Command and Staff College (JSCSC), Staff College War Courses 1939-45, Senior Officers War Course: SD/INT/A/Q Precis, S.D. 4, SD in a Corps, Appendix A.



primary responsibility of the Deputy Adjutant and Quartermaster General (DA & QMG), a staff-trained brigadier who directly supervised AG & QMG branch activities. He had an “A” staff to plan and administer personnel issues and a “Q” staff to look after logistics and other administrative matters. For planning purposes, the DA & QMG also had at his disposal the heads of the various service branches, including those for the medical services, the ordnance corps, supply and transport (ST), the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineering (REME) branch, the Provost Corps, the chaplaincy, and postal services. Finally, corps headquarters had on their establishment a headquarters defence company, which included infantry and anti-aircraft personnel, to provide location protection. British and Canadian corps headquarters were not small. Fully manned establishments called for a total of 92 officers, 511 other ranks, and some 116 vehicles.<sup>29</sup>

Organizations that large could not possibly be moved quickly or easily, which is why they were broken down for mobile operations. The terminology was inconsistent, but there were essentially three elements to all British and Canadian corps headquarters: a Main Headquarters, “concerned chiefly with the actual fighting”; a Rear Headquarters, “concerned with administration”; and a Tactical Headquarters, or “Tac,” which enabled the commander to place himself well forward or visit formations, while still exercising control.<sup>30</sup> The composition of the various elements, naturally enough, suited their primary purposes. Main Headquarters contained the “G” staff, the CCRA, the CE, the CSO, and, sometimes the DA & QMG.<sup>31</sup> Very often, corps Main Headquarters were as close, or closer, to the forward troops than divisional headquarters, which were normally within six to seven kilometres of the frontline fighting. The operations room, which was the focal point of command and staff activity at the Main Headquarters, had a fairly standard layout: an Armoured Command Vehicle, the BGS caravan, and the Intelligence Office truck “formed three sides of the operations room, the intervening space covered by a tarpaulin.”<sup>32</sup> Artillery, engineer, air, and counter-battery staffs were nearby, as was the commander’s small caravan, if he had one. Rear Headquarters moved less frequently and typically consisted of the “A” and “Q” staffs complete, plus a representative or two from the “G” staff. The distance between Main and Rear varied greatly, depending on the situation. In the fluid operations in North Africa, Horrocks’s 10th Corps Headquarters had a Main-Rear separation of 100 kilometres on a few occasions, but on the congested Normandy battlefield, he found the two headquarters components only a few kilometres apart.<sup>33</sup> The headquarters element that differed most from commander to commander was the “Tac.” Sometimes these were semi-permanent control stations – complete with radios, antennae, and

map boards – sited where the commander could see the fighting, and which operated without interruption for the duration of an operation. More often than not, however, “Tacs” were just a tiny group of key staff and vehicles that moved around with the commander by day and returned to Main Headquarters at night. They were small enough in composition that the commander could visit forward headquarters without causing a fuss, yet complete enough that he had the advisors and communications apparatus he needed to exercise control. A typical “Tac” contained the commander, the CCRA, the CE, a “G” staff officer, perhaps an aide-de-camp, and no more than a handful of vehicles, but how Tactical Headquarters were used depended very much on the commander. Headquarters, after all, were meant to aid their commanders, so there had to be some allowance for the individual preferences and needs of the man orchestrating the battle.

That sort of accommodation speaks to the primary finding of this inquiry, which is how five men so different in personality, point of view, and upbringing could fit so well into the imperial armies they served. Neither of those armies was in good shape when the war started, by the way. The Canadian Army, in particular, was on life support, so it took some time – years, in fact – to nurse it back to life, allow it to mature, and prepare it for its primary function – fighting and winning the nation’s wars. Long though that rebuilding process may have been, it would not have happened without the hard work of a cadre of trained professionals and the British staff system that helped them put things right. By 1944, the First Canadian Army – what historian John Allan English has called “the last great British imperial army” – had corps that could fight, and fight well, and it could also count on the help of British corps that had been cast in the same mould.<sup>34</sup> The five corps commanders of this study may not have been successful 100 percent of the time, and they may not always have liked the people around them, but the imperial system that trained them and provided them with both the staffs to organize their thoughts and the formations to fight their battles also implanted a connectivity that cut across oceans, ensuring that, when the time came, they could do what was asked of them in war.

# 1

## The Actor: Lieutenant-General Sir Brian Horrocks

*The troops have a saying that if you want to get on in the Army you must be in the right place at the right time and your face must fit. I can think of no one to whom this applies more than to myself.*

– SIR BRIAN HORROCKS

THERE IS A WONDERFUL scene in the 1977 film *A Bridge Too Far*, based on Cornelius Ryan's book about Operation Market Garden.<sup>1</sup> As the troops of the Guards Armoured Division are lined up nose-to-tail on a winding road, ready to launch on one of the riskiest Allied operations of the war, their corps commander, Lieutenant-General Brian Horrocks, driving his own jeep, weaves past them. While doling out directions to his passenger, who happens to be the commanding officer of the armoured regiment that will lead the ground advance in Market Garden, he waves at the waiting soldiers, cracks the odd joke, and addresses many of them by their first names: "Morning, Derek. I'm glad to see someone knows where we're going!" The troops laugh and wave back. Edward Fox, the English actor who portrayed Horrocks in the film, played the part brilliantly. Horrocks really was that likeable. Every soldier or officer who served under him, it seems, has a story of how the general tapped them on the shoulder during a battle, knelt beside a wounded soldier in hospital, or emerged out of the dust to tell frontline soldiers how the battle was going.<sup>2</sup> Horrocks made leadership look easy and Fox captured that beautifully – the down-to-earth general with a natural ability to inspire, the general who rarely fussed over the details, the general untroubled by self-doubt. This is the image of Horrocks that has endured.<sup>3</sup> In a way, it is a lens through which we view the historical evidence, but it is also a lens that can distort our interpretation of the man and his actions.

This is not to say that the *Bridge Too Far* image of Horrocks is false, but rather that it does not do justice to the complexity of his character. There is no doubt that Horrocks understood completely the human dimension of war and how well British and Commonwealth soldiers responded to the carefree and casual professionalism he projected, but they saw only what Horrocks wanted them

to see. Montgomery's Chief of Staff, Major-General Sir Francis de Guingand, said that he always thought of Horrocks as "a Marshal Ney," one of Napoleon Bonaparte's most colourful and daring generals.<sup>4</sup> What they perhaps did not realize was how deliberate he was about planning operations, how at times he exuded a confidence that was not always there. Horrocks would have admitted to that – and he did, in his memoir, *A Full Life*. Take, for example, the passage dealing with how he conducted himself during the first morning of the battle for Alam Halfa in August 1942: "It was difficult ... to shave, dress calmly then walk over to the operations room. I would have liked to have leapt out of my valise and run over, but the appearance of an unshaven, out-of-breath corps commander would not have created a favourable impression."<sup>5</sup>

This was a man hiding his anxiety. In a way, Horrocks was an actor – for all the right reasons. In fact, he used the acting metaphor several times in *A Full Life*.<sup>6</sup> True, cheeriness and confidence were part of his character, but no one is cheerful and confident all the time. At tense times, particularly at the start of major operations such as Market Garden, like a good character actor, Horrocks hid his doubts, slipping into the persona of the unflappable gentleman general. No one, neither soldier nor staff officer, needed to see their general fretting or brooding over upcoming operations, so Horrocks lived the maxim of his mentor, Field Marshal Viscount Montgomery: "However bad the situation may be, *the commander must always radiate confidence*."<sup>7</sup> This is the key to understanding how Horrocks exercised command. He had sound technical skills, but he was also a masterful performer who consistently managed to tap the full capacity of the people who worked for him.

HE MAY HAVE LIVED through some of the grimmest events in modern times, but Brian Horrocks was a genuinely happy person. He was happy in the sense that he enjoyed, without guilt, life's good moments and he accepted, without self-pity, that he could gain from the bad ones. This was the case from the very beginning. Born at Ranniket, India, to a Royal Army Medical Corps surgeon from Lancashire and an Irish Presbyterian mother, Horrocks, who adored his parents, had "an extremely happy childhood."<sup>8</sup> Whereas some may have found "the usual wandering service life" difficult, Horrocks found it an adventure. His preteen years in Gibraltar were packed full of fun – "bathing, hunting with the Calpe hounds, cricket matches, race meetings and children's parties." He loved the boat rides between his home in Gibraltar and his preparatory school at Durham. Later, when his father had been posted to the War Office in 1909, he moved on to Uppingham School in Leicestershire and found it fulfilling as well. Not that Horrocks enjoyed the academic curriculum. Far from it; he loved

games: “My entire life was devoted to sport.” Mathematics and history took a back seat to rugby and cricket. Not surprisingly, his school reports noted “impetuosity – too prone to answer without thinking – inclined to rush things without making sure of what he is doing.” Life was simply too entertaining for serious study, so Horrocks naturally drifted into the army class, because it seemed so much more compatible with his propensity for fun.

The experience of the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, did little to shape him up though. In January 1913, his army career commenced inauspiciously when he passed into Sandhurst, 173rd in order of merit, second from the bottom in his class.<sup>9</sup> He was, by his own admission, “idle,” “scruffy,” and “careless.”<sup>10</sup> Consequently, he “achieved nothing at all and remained a gentleman cadet (the equivalent of a private soldier) throughout [his] entire time at the college.” To cap off an undistinguished college career, he ended his time at Sandhurst with three months on restrictions, which meant confinement to barracks, menial duties, and show parades.<sup>11</sup> He and a few friends had gone to the races at Gatwick, confident that they had a “certainty” for the third race, only to find that the certainty was distinctly and disappointingly uncertain. It had also drained all their funds for the return journey. Horrocks did not worry about much in those days, but he felt lucky to have passed out of college in July 1914, again near the bottom of his class. Within a month of leaving Sandhurst, he was off to war.

He did not last long in battle, but he learned a lot. Like most Britons, he was swept up in the romance that preceded the disillusion of the Great War, feeling “like a king among men” as he marched past cheering crowds at the Chatham railway station on 11 August 1914 with a ninety-five-man reinforcement draft for the 1st Battalion Middlesex Regiment.<sup>12</sup> In France and Belgium, he grew to admire the average soldier’s ability to scrounge and make himself comfortable; and he loved the “priceless Cockney sense of humour,” which he thought the perfect tonic in times of stress. Wisecracks like “Why don’t you give your face a holiday, chum? Try a smile,” can bring a little lift of spirits, even during the most draining of days.<sup>13</sup> He also learned from his company commander, a Captain Gibbons, who stressed the importance of knowing one’s subordinates and sharing their misery. When the battalion officers were offered billets in a comfortable farmhouse away from a manure-packed paddock in which the soldiers were bedding down, Gibbons fumed: “If the men sleep out, we sleep out.”<sup>14</sup> Horrocks recognized the importance of the gesture: “My heart sank but I knew instinctively that he was right.” The willingness of soldiers to follow was constructed on gestures like this. It is interesting how some events, though seemingly insignificant in the bigger scheme of things, become embedded in memory, making lifelong lessons of themselves. Forty-five years later, Horrocks wrote a lesson that Gibbons had left him into his memoirs.

On 21 October 1914, Horrocks became a prisoner of war, something he described in hindsight as “probably the best apprenticeship for the difficult business of command in war.”<sup>15</sup> At the town of Maisnil, during the First Battle of Ypres, he received a bullet wound through the lower abdomen and upper thigh while defending the town against a German attack.<sup>16</sup> Not long after he was wounded, the German attackers surrounded Horrocks’s platoon: “The stretcher bearers could not possibly get any of the wounded away at all and, as our men were pressed back, I was taken prisoner.”<sup>17</sup> A miserable month of pain and infection in a filthy German field hospital followed. When Horrocks began to mend, he was moved back to prisoner-of-war camps, where, away from “C.O., adjutant, company commander, or kindly platoon sergeant,” the first life lesson was one of self-sufficiency.<sup>18</sup> It was an internal battle against what Horrocks called the “deadly monotony” of prison camp life, a monotony feeding a dependency that could cause one to deteriorate, mentally and physically, as many did. Horrocks kept himself mentally and physically alert trying to escape. He never succeeded, however. He made it outside the wire on several occasions, once even making it to the Dutch border, but he was always apprehended and always sent to solitary confinement.

But even solitary confinement had its upside – more time to think about and plan the next escape attempt. Simply having something to scheme about kept him sane. He had probably never been this methodical about anything in his life: “Escaping was a profession in itself and like all professions the more one worked at it the more proficient one became ... My first efforts at escaping were very clumsy ... But I built up experience, and was quite confident that if the war went on long enough I would eventually succeed.”<sup>19</sup> That meant gathering whatever information could be gained on sentries, perimeter barriers, and even the terrain and routes to be traversed, then thinking through, in detail, the preparations for each stage of the escape – getting civilian clothes or something that looked like them, finding a compass, or acquiring some German currency. Despite his lack of success, Horrocks believed that the experience had been a useful period of mental conditioning: “I had learned at an early age and in a hard school to stand on my own feet and make my own decisions, often in a split second. I had also acquired the useful habit of thinking things out from the enemy point of view so that I might always be one jump ahead. These were lessons which served me well later on.”<sup>20</sup> He also had plenty of time to study human behaviour, something that became a lifelong interest. Why did some people crack, while others endured difficult times with a smile? How important was routine, or humour, or leadership to morale? Horrocks came to despise the infectious defeatism of some senior officers in captivity, many of whom warned Horrocks and his fellow escape enthusiasts against trying to break out.

To Horrocks they were cowards. Their fear and their pessimism dragged down soldiers who looked to them for example.<sup>21</sup> These observations would inform his method of command in the years to come. Horrocks happily left captivity in 1918, aged only twenty-two years but a fairly confident subaltern who did not need to be told what to do in order to act.

Useful though the experience of captivity may have been, Horrocks did not wish for more of it; sadly, however, that is what he got. After spending a month or two – and all of his back pay – “beating it up in London,” in January 1919 Horrocks volunteered for service in the British contingent that was to assist the White Russian armies in their fight against the Bolsheviks. It proved a most depressing experience. He arrived at Vladivostok in April, travelled inland to join a ragtag brigade of the 1st Siberian Army in May, retreated in front of Bolshevik advances in the final weeks of 1919, and wound up, once again, a prisoner of war in January 1920.<sup>22</sup> This time, Horrocks did not put his escape skills to good use, mostly because he thought the Bolsheviks would surely send him home, and partly because Siberia on foot was a certain death sentence. Much to his disappointment, however, the Red Army’s promises of repatriation to the United Kingdom buckled under organizational incompetence, and a nearly fatal bout with typhus kept Horrocks bedridden in a squalid hospital for several weeks. Not until October 1920, after miles of train travel and weeks in various prisoner-of-war camps, did Horrocks and his fellow Britons cross the border into Finland. In his memoirs, Horrocks had little to say about the lessons of his Siberian experience except that near-starvation, bitter cold, and filth had taught him “to live life rough.”<sup>23</sup> Future stresses and strains would surely pale in comparison.

In late November 1920, Horrocks returned to an army life that was, for him, disappointingly dull. Since passing into Sandhurst, Captain Horrocks had spent eight years in the army doing little that would have prepared him for higher command, and the next ten years did little to change that trend. As the British government struggled with post-war retrenchment, the British Army in turn struggled with miserly budgets that curtailed field training and equipment acquisitions. Promotion was also painfully slow and field exercises featured soldiers wearing placards that read “this represents a section.”<sup>24</sup> Horrocks could get only so excited about that sort of thing. A year of occupation duty during 1920-21 with the British Army of the Rhine was uneventful, as was a deployment in aid of the civil power during a coal miners’ strike immediately after the 1st Battalion Middlesex Regiment returned to the United Kingdom. A year in Ireland during 1921-22 did little to raise his morale.<sup>25</sup> Horrocks, who was half-Irish, hated the whole business of “search[ing] for hidden arms, patrols, keeping a lookout for road-blocks and dealing with ambushes by the Sinn Feiners.”<sup>26</sup>

Security duties during the 1923 Silesian plebiscite only compounded the hum-drum.<sup>27</sup> Horrocks needed more challenge and excitement than the army of the 1920s was offering, so it is not surprising that, when his battalion settled into Aldershot in late 1923, he returned to one of his passions: games. The self-confessed “games addict” found the modern pentathlon much to his liking because it combined riding, swimming, running, fencing, and shooting. He took to it with great enthusiasm, training like a demon, eventually winning the national championships and representing Great Britain in the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris. This was a significant personal achievement, but, as Horrocks reflected some thirty-five years later, “I was now unquestionably in danger of ruining any chances of success which I may have had by allowing sport to fill my life to the exclusion of everything else.”<sup>28</sup>

That began to change in 1927. About that time, Horrocks’s father gently encouraged his “work-shy, sport-loving son” to settle down and sit the entrance examination for the Staff College, Camberley. Without the designation of “psc” (Passed Staff College), no officer could expect to achieve senior rank in the army, so the junior Horrocks, who by this time was a fairly long-in-the-tooth captain with an undistinguished career, listened: “I at last started to work at my profession.”<sup>29</sup> The timing was also right. In 1928, he married Nancy Kitchin, and within a year they had a daughter. Horrocks also had to consider that he was not a wealthy man. His father made a decent living as a colonel in the Royal Army Medical Corps, but there was certainly no family fortune to fall back on. As he later wrote: “I am one of those impecunious people who has always lived on his pay.”<sup>30</sup> If he wanted to provide a comfortable living for his family, he would have to progress in rank. Family responsibility forced him to focus on his career; getting into staff college was an important first step.

During the course of his preparations for the entrance examinations, he spent nearly four years working with the Territorials as Adjutant of the 9th Battalion Middlesex Regiment.<sup>31</sup> Having turned down a posting to China to concentrate on the Camberley and Quetta examinations, Horrocks had not expected much to come of his time with “Saturday night soldiers,” but he found it “a most invigorating experience and a vital step in my military education because, after all, these are the people who in the final analysis win or lose our wars.”<sup>32</sup> Motivating volunteers, who gave of their free time and who were even more budget-restricted and kit-deprived than regular army troops, was challenging work, but it honed Horrocks’s human skills for the citizen army that would fight the Second World War. Iron discipline, he found, did not work; better to make the citizen soldier feel guilty about missing a parade and make him want to train harder, for the good of his mates.<sup>33</sup> His unorthodox approach to training stemmed from this period: “In training I am a great believer in running before



you can walk, because, by finding out how difficult it is to run, men take greater interest in the problem of learning to walk. All training must be done through the brain; the bored man absorbs nothing.”<sup>34</sup> The lifelong student of human behaviour was becoming a masterful practitioner of the art of leadership. He still needed the technical training of Staff College, however, if he hoped to advance any further.

In 1931, after sitting the exam five times and at the age of thirty-five, Horrocks happily passed into Staff College, Camberley. A few years later, he would have been three years too old even to sit the examinations.<sup>35</sup> For someone who had never been given to academic study of any kind, Horrocks took amazingly well to the program at Camberley. As it had been for so many other officers, Staff College was the “turning point” in his life.<sup>36</sup> He found the curriculum engaging, and the syndicate method of instruction, he thought, “could not have been better.” The Commandant at the time was Major-General Sir John Dill, whom Horrocks admired for his “integrity, great charm and ... first-class brain,” and the Directing Staff (DS) – which included Lieutenant-Colonels Henry Maitland Wilson and Robert Forbes Adam as well as Wing Commanders John Slessor and Trafford Leigh-Mallory – exuded professional competence.<sup>37</sup> There was also a comforting familiarity about the curriculum for Horrocks.<sup>38</sup> The process for conducting appreciations was not unlike the one he had developed informally while trying to escape German captivity – gathering the factors, weighing courses of action, assessing possible enemy actions, and so on. Now, instead of doing that for one or two people at a time, he was learning how to do it for brigades, divisions, and corps, and he liked it. He did well at it too.<sup>39</sup> Horrocks was becoming a professional.

He applied himself fully in a series of appointments between the time that he completed Staff College in 1932 and the outbreak of war in 1939. Following a brief ten-month return to his regiment in Egypt, Horrocks accepted a posting to the War Office in London.<sup>40</sup> Although initially unenthusiastic about life as a staff captain to the Military Secretary’s Branch of the War Office in 1934, he soon found working on personnel issues quite interesting. In his particular sub-branch, which handled officer promotions between the ranks of second-lieutenant and lieutenant-colonel, he found that “few secrets were hidden.”<sup>41</sup> It also gave Horrocks a window on who was a rising star and who was not. After two years at Whitehall, he received the plum appointment of Brigade Major for the 5th Brigade at Aldershot.<sup>42</sup> As the chief staff officer for a brigade earmarked as part of a proposed expeditionary force for the continent, Horrocks had opportunity to use what he had learned at the Staff College – planning contingency operations, coordinating collective training for three infantry battalions, and honing the skills of his own headquarters.

Aside from the opportunity the two years at Aldershot gave Horrocks to fine-tune his staff skills, it also afforded him a lesson in how not to command. The 5th Brigade was one of three in Sir Archibald Wavell's 2nd Infantry Division.<sup>43</sup> For Horrocks, Wavell was a prime example of how intellectual brilliance and technical competence were not enough for command: "[Wavell's] brilliant, imaginative brain lay behind the most expressionless, poker face I have ever come across ... We who knew Wavell admired him immensely, but owing to his almost pathological taciturnity he was completely unknown to the bulk of officers and men under his command. He was quite incapable of going round inspiring the troops."<sup>44</sup> Horrocks would not make that mistake. From the 5th Brigade, he went back to Camberley as a member of the Directing Staff in the summer of 1938, a posting that would not have happened had he not proven himself an adroit staff officer. By the time the Germans invaded France in May 1940, he had been promoted to lieutenant-colonel and risen to the position of College GSO 1 (General Staff Office First Grade). In fact, he was holding this position when, on 10 May 1940, he received orders to assume command of the 2nd Battalion Middlesex Regiment, which was then deploying to Belgium with the rest of the British Expeditionary Force to meet the German advance.

The 1940 campaign in France and Flanders lasted less than a month for Horrocks, but it was a critical period for two reasons: he impressed the right people and the right people impressed him. The 2nd Battalion Middlesex Regiment was a machine gun unit in Major-General B.L. Montgomery's 3rd Division and, as the commanding officer of a divisional unit, Horrocks reported directly to Montgomery. No other infantry battalion commander in the division had such a direct line to the boss. This was a make-or-break situation with a general who was "known to be ruthlessly efficient, but somewhat of a showman," and Horrocks knew it: "I was told sympathetically that I wouldn't last long under his command, and, to be honest, I would rather have served under any other divisional commander."<sup>45</sup> But Horrocks held up well in very demanding circumstances. As Montgomery conducted one of the most difficult operations in war – a withdrawal in contact with the enemy – Horrocks's machine-gunners efficiently supported the infantry brigades while they disengaged from the enemy and made their way back to the Channel coast. On 18-19 May, Montgomery had Horrocks commanding a rearguard of two machine gun battalions and two anti-tank batteries to cover the division's withdrawal across the Escaut Canal.<sup>46</sup> This was a tricky operation and Horrocks handled what was practically a brigade with ease, increasing his currency with Montgomery such that two weeks later, Montgomery nominated Horrocks as acting brigade commander for the 11th Brigade in the 4th Division.

Horrocks, too, was impressed. Montgomery he found to be supremely competent. On the night of 27-28 May, he managed to disengage his division from a position on the frontier near Roubaix and reposition it some thirty miles north to Noordschote to fill a hole in the line left by the surrendering Belgians, and cover the withdrawal to Dunkirk.<sup>47</sup> In an operation conducted largely at night and over refugee-clogged roads, the first unit to move was the 2nd Battalion Middlesex. Horrocks conducted his own reconnaissance of the new defensive area on the morning of 27 May, met the company commanders at a designated rendezvous point at 1400 hours to give orders, then had the companies move directly into their positions at 1600 hours. For an anxious evening, Horrocks and his machine-gunners barely straddled the thirteen-mile-wide gap in the front until the arrival of the rest of the division on the morning of 28 May.<sup>48</sup> Montgomery never doubted that he could execute the manoeuvres of 27-28 May. Indeed, as far as Horrocks could tell, Monty never doubted anything he did. But it was more than Montgomery's competence that Horrocks admired; it was his calm. He remembered Montgomery's air of normalcy in a time of crisis: "During the whole of the withdrawal, he insisted on having meals at regular hours and he never missed his normal night's sleep."<sup>49</sup> Horrocks appreciated that sort of composure.

Another senior commander who Horrocks thought played a critical role in the preservation of order and morale was his corps commander, and a future Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), Lieutenant-General Sir Alan Brooke: "I felt vaguely at the time that this alert, seemingly iron, man without a nerve in his body, whom I met from time to time at 3rd Division Headquarters and who gave out his orders in short clipped sentences, was a great soldier ... We regarded him as a highly efficient military machine."<sup>50</sup> Years later, after having read excerpts of the Alanbrooke diaries in Arthur Bryant's *Turn of the Tide*, and after having acquired his own lens of command experience, Horrocks came to "appreciate what a consummate actor he must have been ... he never gave us any indication of those moments of utter despair when it seemed to him almost impossible that any of us would ever escape."<sup>51</sup> Confidence and calm, even if they had to be affected, had to radiate from the top, especially at times when catastrophe seemed so near and rumours were rampant. They percolated down the chain of command and preserved the discipline and morale of the soldiers, who carried on "seemingly indifferent to the chaos around them."<sup>52</sup> It also preserved the sense of humour that Horrocks loved so much. After a very close call with the enemy during a rearguard action, one of Horrocks's company commanders quipped: "Don't look round, sir, I think we're being followed."<sup>53</sup> For the British soldier, it was the unruffled composure of the Montgomerys and

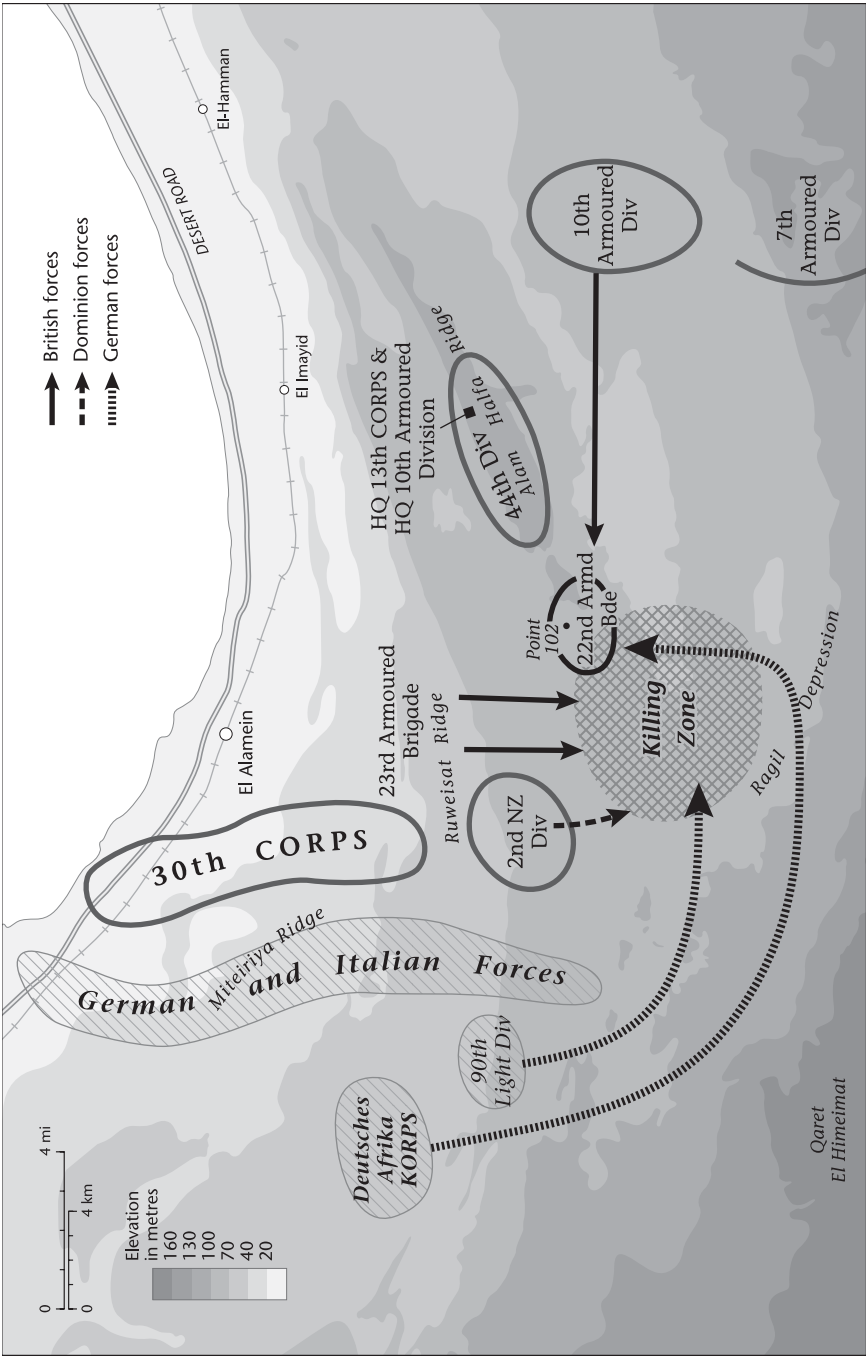
Brookes that worked best, not the hell-raising speeches of the Pattons or the melodrama of the MacArthurs.<sup>54</sup>

After Dunkirk, the two years that Horrocks spent in the United Kingdom, doing his part to rebuild a shattered army, offered him plenty of opportunity to watch Montgomery – and learn. Taking command of the 3rd Division's 9th Brigade, Horrocks was quite happy to be “back in the fold with Monty again.”<sup>55</sup> He commanded the 9th Brigade from June 1940 to January 1941, after which he went to Eastern Command as Brigadier General Staff. Six months later, he went back to Montgomery when he was promoted to major-general and appointed to command the 44th (Home Counties) Division, a formation in Monty's Southeastern Army. This, Horrocks believed, was another critical period in his development as a commander: “I always reckon that I learned most of my practical soldiering first of all as a brigade-major at Aldershot under Wavell and secondly during the nine months which I spent in south-east England under Monty.”<sup>56</sup> Montgomery was an excellent trainer and a first-rate people picker, but there was also a good deal of “stage management” with him. He talked of stage-managing his battles – getting all the arms properly synchronized and supplied such that each element could play to his plan – but he also had knack for simply putting across clear messages to subordinates. Horrocks marvelled at how Monty could fill a film theatre full of officers and keep them spellbound for an hour, sometimes more, while he explained an operation, dissected an exercise for salient lessons, whatever. He spoke plainly and utterly without ambiguity. In fact, the topics of Monty's talks mattered little. Horrocks took in that Monty was really selling himself, and the message was quite simple: “I know what I'm doing. I'm completely confident we'll succeed. You should be too.” Montgomery understood that soldiers at all levels have doubts, so whatever he could do to expunge, or at least mitigate, those doubts by radiating confidence or keeping troops informed would only make them perform better.

Horrocks grasped the lessons thoroughly and put them into practice. He copied Montgomery's method of addressing groups: “I have held many similar conferences and have always tried to follow the Monty technique.”<sup>57</sup> He also copied Montgomery's habit of getting out of his headquarters and visiting the units under his command. The war diary for the 44th Division shows that, in his first full month as GOC, Horrocks addressed all the officers under his command once, supervised two exercises, conducted a cloth model exercise with senior divisional officers, and made no less than eight inspections of, or visits to, brigades or units, including service support troops.<sup>58</sup> All ranks in the 44th Division knew their white-haired GOC, and they liked him. As one trooper recalled: “He was known as a man's man. Whilst he had the [rank], he seemed

to think and talk, particularly to us, as if he was one of us.”<sup>59</sup> Of course, Horrocks was not really one of them at all. With his English public school background and having spent much of his life abroad, he had little in common with the common soldier. But he was approachable and he was genuinely interested in the many people who worked for him. He conducted himself the same way when he left the Southeastern Army to command the 9th Armoured Division in March 1942. Not that he was easy on his troops. Shortly after arriving at the 9th Armoured Division, Horrocks “came to the conclusion that they had been too long in Northamptonshire. The wives and families had of course arrived and they were all living too soft.”<sup>60</sup> He moved them out of their current billets to the Newmarket area, where most of the units lived under canvas but where they were also close to good training areas for armoured manoeuvre: “I worked them very hard indeed; exercise after exercise, and the harder they worked the more they seemed to enjoy it.” The exercises progressed very rapidly in complexity and difficulty, starting first with harbour drills in April, then advancing to road movement in May, and culminating with opposed river crossings in June and July.<sup>61</sup> This was an extremely quick progression in training, but Horrocks believed that troops, and their commanders, had to be challenged, especially at a time when he had ripped them from their cozy Northamptonshire lives. He also believed in “working hard, then playing hard,” so, after a particularly tough set of exercises, he gave the entire division four days leave to attend the derby in Newmarket.<sup>62</sup> The troops loved it. In August 1942, he was making good progress with his armoured division when his time in command was cut short. Montgomery, who had just assumed command of the Eighth Army in North Africa, needed him again. Horrocks was now going to command a corps, in battle, in the desert.

IT MADE HIM NERVOUS. British fortunes in the Western Desert had not been good in the preceding eighteen months, and many a British general had paid a price. As Horrocks recounted: “Command in the desert was regarded as an almost certain prelude to a bowler hat.”<sup>63</sup> But shortly after his arrival, Montgomery put him at ease somewhat with “one of the most remarkable military appreciations I ever heard.”<sup>64</sup> Monty explained that, after weeks of recoiling in front of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel’s advances, the Eighth Army had established a defensive position along the El Alamein Line, a thirty-five-mile front at the bottleneck between the sea on the northern flank and the Qattara Depression to the south (see Map 1). The army commander envisioned a campaign in which he would first defend against an attack by Rommel’s German-Italian forces, then, after he had assembled and trained a mobile armoured corps, launch



MAP 1 The battle of Alam Halfa. Adapted from Sir Brian Horrocks, *A Full Life* (London: Collins, 1960), 117.

an offensive to drive Rommel out of Africa. Horrocks was to play a crucial role in the first stage of Montgomery's plan. His 13th Corps – consisting of the 2nd New Zealand, 44th (Home Counties), and 7th Armoured Divisions, plus an incomplete 10th Armoured Division – defended the southern half of the line in front of Rommel. Whereas William Ramsden's 30th Corps in the north had a deep defensive position behind a deep minefield, Horrocks's corps was actually "rather thin on the ground," having eighteen miles of frontage and the task of holding the key terrain features of the Ruweisat and Alam Halfa Ridges against German attack. Most Eighth Army commanders and staffs, including Horrocks's predecessor, "Strafer" Gott, anticipated that Rommel would attack in the south, "with ALAM EL HALFA as his first objective ... subsequently cutting the road in the HAMMAN area and thrusting straight for Alexandria."<sup>65</sup> Horrocks had to hold the vital ground of Alam Halfa Ridge, which dominated both the northern axis along the desert road to Alexandria and the open approach along the barrel track to the south. And he had to do it "without getting unduly mauled in the process."<sup>66</sup> That was how Montgomery put it. By that he meant that Horrocks was not to lose too many tanks, because they would be needed for the October offensive.

Montgomery had given his newly arrived subordinate a difficult task, tactically and psychologically. He had to stop Rommel and he had to convince his troops that he, and they, could do it. Intelligence reports anticipated that Rommel would almost certainly attack with his Deutsches Afrika Korps (DAK) and 90th Light Division through the lightly held gap between Alam Nayil to the left of the 2nd New Zealand Division and the Qattara Depression. Once through the gap, Rommel would either swing long and left to envelop the key terrain at the Alam Halfa Ridge, or turn sharply left and drive directly at the ridge, which would be a threat to his left flank if he wanted to drive on to Alexandria. Because of Rommel's critical fuel shortage, Horrocks and the intelligence analysts believed the second course of action to be the more likely. In very simple terms, Horrocks planned to draw Rommel into a big bowl then shoot him up with tanks, anti-tank guns, artillery, and the Desert Air Force.

Some controversy surrounds who deserves credit for the Alam Halfa battle plan. In *The Desert Generals*, Corelli Barnett argues that Horrocks and Montgomery simply "adopted" the plan developed by Gott and Auchinleck.<sup>67</sup> This is simply not true.<sup>68</sup> Having the same battle positions did not equate to fighting in the same manner. Horrocks and Montgomery fought a very different battle from the one envisioned by Gott and Auchinleck. It is true that Gott had previously identified that his best course of action in the short term was to "lure the enemy out in front of the minefields to fight on ground disadvantageous to him."<sup>69</sup> Gott had also designated the Alam Halfa Ridge as vital both to holding

the current position and to preventing any enemy advance towards Alexandria. After Gott's death in a plane crash on 7 August, the 13th Corps staff, and Gott's temporary successor, Lieutenant-General Bernard Freyberg, refined this concept of operations over the course of two weeks. By the time Horrocks arrived, the plan had been developed such that the 7th Armoured Division (less the 22nd Armoured Brigade) would fight a delay battle, drawing the enemy into the killing zone south of Alam Halfa, then take up positions backstopping the eastern end of the bowl, while the 2nd New Zealand Division held the Alam Nayil position in force. The 22nd Armoured Brigade and a battery of anti-tank guns would occupy a defensive position at Point 102, the southwestern extremity of the Alam Halfa position, "from which to fight and manoeuvre as directed by the Corps Commander."<sup>70</sup> This was merely a framework – nothing more – for the battle that Montgomery and Horrocks eventually fought.<sup>71</sup>

Montgomery and Horrocks both committed themselves to holding the vital ground, but they were far less willing to risk losing tanks. One day after his arrival in the desert, Montgomery ordered the 44th (Home Counties) Division out of Cairo to occupy the Alam Halfa Ridge with two brigades, while the third brigade would bolster the 2nd New Zealand Division defences. Auchinleck had been reluctant to commit the newly arrived 44th Division to battle before it had undergone more training; oddly, neither he nor Gott had planned to occupy the vital ground at Alam Halfa in force. Montgomery did – immediately. Horrocks also changed the role of the 22nd Armoured Brigade. An order dated 14 August had tasked the brigade to "be prepared to seize any favourable opportunity to destroy any enemy main forces or their maintenance which penetrate East of the minefield."<sup>72</sup> When Horrocks arrived at 13th Corps, the 22nd Armoured Brigade "was practising these attacks."<sup>73</sup> As Brigadier Pip Roberts, the brigade commander, described it: "On code word 'so and so' we would move to a certain area with a specific task; on another code word we would move somewhere else, etc, etc ... the multiplicity of tasks as far as 22nd Armoured Brigade was concerned did not inspire the greatest confidence."<sup>74</sup> Horrocks would have none of it. The 22nd Armoured Brigade had, at that time, sixty Grant tanks – dubbed the E.L.H. (Egypt's Last Hope) by Eighth Army troops because they were the only thing nearly equal to the German Mark IIIs and Mark IVs – and Horrocks "hated the idea of committing them head-on against a superior number of German tanks estimated to be about 234."<sup>75</sup> He decided instead to fight a "purely defensive battle" and ordered Roberts to dig in his tanks on Point 102. This came as a relief to Roberts and his staff: "Gone were all the other plans and we gladly destroyed the mass of traces with different code names ... There was one firm plan and one position to occupy and we all felt better."<sup>76</sup> Horrocks would use the fire of the Grants to grind Rommel down during the defensive



battle and save them for another day. To complete the plan, Horrocks also had the 10th Armoured Division, when it became available, take up the backstop position at the eastern end of the killing zone, and he arranged with Montgomery to have the 23rd Armoured Brigade move into the gap between the 2nd New Zealand Division and 22nd Armoured Brigade, should that become necessary.<sup>77</sup> With the bowl sealed, Horrocks could shoot up Rommel's troops with direct fire, indirect fire, and air attack. This was significantly different from the previous plan.

Now all Horrocks had to do was convince his soldiers they could win, and this was perhaps the more difficult undertaking. Rommel had driven them out of two successive defensive lines since June, forcing them to recoil some 250 miles to their current position at El Alamein. And a series of offensive moves in July had failed to recapture the initiative.<sup>78</sup> Putting those defeats out of their minds would be difficult, especially for a newcomer to the desert. Simplifying the plan helped. Montgomery's "no further withdrawal" set the right tone, but it was not so much the order itself as it was the accompanying actions that made an impact. It may be true that Auchinleck had intended to hold on to the El Alamein Line with a view to taking the offensive in several weeks' time, and it may be true that withdrawal plans to save the Eighth Army for the defence of the Middle Eastern Command east of the Nile were only prudent contingencies,<sup>79</sup> but it would take more than mere orders and discussions among generals to convince an army that had been on its heels for weeks that it could win. Montgomery was a great communicator, something that Auchinleck was not. In his first meeting with the Eighth Army Staff on 13 August, Monty directed that any orders for withdrawal be burned: "We would fight on the ground we now held, and if we couldn't stay there alive, we would stay there dead."<sup>80</sup> This, of course, was pure drama, but dramatic measures were necessary. He also backed up the drama with action. His decision to commit the yet-untested 44th Division to the Alam Halfa Ridge sent an even stronger message, which was this: we will hold here because we have to hold here; there is nothing left in Cairo.

Montgomery also visited all his units, wearing an Australian slouch hat on which he had pinned the cap badges of the Eighth Army's regiments, exuding confidence, explaining how he "would hit Rommel for six out of Africa," and making sure that as many people as possible set eyes on their new army commander. Auchinleck's troops had seen him standing on the side of the road as they retreated from Mersa Matruh to El Alamein.<sup>81</sup> The two images speak volumes – one of confidence and vigour, the other of exhaustion and impending defeat. Impressions mattered and Horrocks understood completely what Monty was trying to do:

There had grown up [in the Eighth Army] a Rommel myth. He was regarded by our troops as a sort of ubiquitous and invincible figure. Nobody realised better than Monty that almost the first and most important thing which he had to do was replace this feeling with a Montgomery fable ... Very soon the soldiers were discussing their strange new commander, who wore curious hats and, while buzzing about all over the place, constantly stopped and talked to them.<sup>82</sup>

Some veteran desert officers “were not particularly impressed with [the] self-assured, white-kneed export from Britain,” but, by and large, the soldiers’ reaction to Montgomery was favourable.<sup>83</sup> From the bottom up, Montgomery repaired the Eighth Army’s confidence.

Horrocks worked at it too. On 19 August, he held a conference at which “he explained his plans for meeting any enemy offensive” to all lieutenant-colonels and above in his corps.<sup>84</sup> Explaining the alterations he had made to existing plans was important, but Horrocks’s main aim was to make an impression on his subordinates – to project confidence. Succeeding the popular and competent Gott was a tough act, and Horrocks understandably sensed a “speculative look in people’s eyes.”<sup>85</sup> In some cases, it was more than speculation. The GOC 2nd New Zealand Division, Bernard Freyberg, senior even to Montgomery on the Army Lists, was peeved at being passed over by a brand new lieutenant-general for command of 13th Corps.<sup>86</sup> He had also been through several disastrous battles – in Greece, on Crete, and at Mersa Matruh, so his skepticism was understandable. Horrocks recalled that Freyberg questioned “every order I issued.”<sup>87</sup> It may not have been clear to Horrocks at the time, but Freyberg was also exercising his right as the commander of a national contingent to question most orders issued him by the corps.<sup>88</sup> In addition, Freyberg and his New Zealanders were not alone in their “most intense distrust, almost hatred” of British armour, which they believed had left them stranded too many times in the past, and the chain of command that had allowed it to happen.<sup>89</sup> The GOC 7th Armoured Division, Major-General J.M.L. Renton, also openly questioned both Horrocks and Montgomery about their plan to dig in the tanks of the 22nd Armoured Brigade and fight a static battle.<sup>90</sup> Montgomery responded by detaching the 22nd Armoured Brigade from Renton’s division and placing it under Headquarters 13th Corps, where he could ensure that the tanks would be used as he intended.<sup>91</sup> Horrocks later placed the brigade under the control of the very experienced Major-General Alec Gatehouse, GOC 10th Armoured Division, whose headquarters was immediately adjacent to his own. Naturally, this arrangement led to some “annoyance” in the 7th Armoured Division.<sup>92</sup>

The conference of 19 August was a first step in redressing the mistrust. Horrocks strode onto the Alam Halfa stage without speaking notes and beaming

confidence. He smiled. He spoke clearly. He gestured deliberately. And he explained a simple plan in simple terms. As one 13th Corps staff officer testified: “He gave us a taste of what became the famous Horrocks oratory. Enormous confidence, dynamic and forceful delivery and great charm and manner ... We lapped it up and I for one went away feeling a lot better.”<sup>93</sup> Brigadier Howard Kippenberger of the 5th New Zealand Brigade felt much the same way: “The whole plan for the battle was thoroughly explained to us and I liked it more than that for any action I had taken part in. More pleasing than the plan was the ready, balanced feeling that we all had.” Even Freyberg, whose resentment never fully dissipated, liked what he heard. He particularly appreciated that his division would fight as a division – and not in isolated brigade groups as it had done under the previous regime – but he also described Horrocks as being “full of optimism.”<sup>94</sup> At the very least, Freyberg was confident in this battle plan.

Indeed, confidence was one of the first points Horrocks emphasized in his “Personal Memorandum From Com[man]d[er] 13 Corps,” which he sent to his divisional commanders on 23 August: “The importance of this battle and the way we propose to fight it should be explained to all ranks throughout the corps. This is vital. We have a good plan with every chance of success and provided the men realize this they will fight with confidence and intelligence ... We are one corps with complete confidence in each other.”<sup>95</sup> Getting this message out to every soldier in the corps would require the full effort of the chain of command, which Horrocks enlisted: “Inspiration comes from officers and officers must assemble their men and talk to them.” To underline his own assuredness that the coming battle would go the Eighth Army way, he reminded his divisional commanders “that there is no withdrawal from this area – we fight it out here. So no plans will be prepared for the destruction of water points or dumps of material.”<sup>96</sup> It was one thing to say that the corps would fight “to the last man and the last round”;<sup>97</sup> it was another to back it up with action that left little choice but to do exactly that. Horrocks also understood that training and repetition underpinned confidence, so he arranged for two exercises, one on 22 August and one on 28 August, to rehearse the defensive battle and fine-tune the plan.<sup>98</sup> He did everything he could to expunge doubt.

This was when he needed his acting skills most, to cloak his insecurities and convey confidence. Who would not have been nervous? A new corps commander, fighting his first formation-level battle, fighting it with a corps that had been in combat for nearly three years, fighting it with senior commanders who resented him as an inexperienced newcomer from England, and fighting against an enemy many believed unbeatable: this was an incredible test of fortitude and skill. But he did manage to veil his anxiety, even after the start of the battle. When Rommel finally attacked in force after dark on 30 August, Horrocks

entered his headquarters to discover that the battle was shaping up very much as anticipated:

For me this was the most exciting period of my life, my first corps battle, and I would have given anything to have stayed there and watched the battle develop on the operations map. But I had already learned one lesson, the value of sleep. The plans were all made. There was nothing I could possibly do that night, and it wouldn't be a very good example to my staff if the corps commander kept fussing round all night ... So assuming a nonchalant air which I certainly didn't feel I said good night and walked over to the small hole in the sand where my valise awaited me. I didn't expect to sleep very much, but I had quite a good night's rest.<sup>99</sup>

It was precisely the performance his audience at the headquarters required.

When Horrocks walked back into his headquarters the next morning, as nonchalantly as he had left it, he found, much to his relief, that it was "one of the few battles from my point of view that went according to plan."<sup>100</sup> Horrocks's nerves betrayed him briefly when he got into a bit of "an acrimonious conversation" with Renton about the amount of delay his brigades had imposed.<sup>101</sup> Renton believed that he had sufficiently slowed the advancing enemy and worried that his 7th Motor Brigade would be cut off as Rommel pushed back 4th Light Armoured Brigade in the south. Without asking Horrocks, he ordered both his brigades back to their fallback position at the eastern end of the Ragil Depression. Horrocks thought that the withdrawal had happened too quickly. He wanted more delay. So did Freyberg, who believed that the southeastern corner of his position was now vulnerable as a result of the rapid withdrawal of the 7th Motor Brigade.<sup>102</sup> A longer delay would have forced the enemy to burn even more fuel and exposed his administrative echelon vehicles to air attack when they came forward to refuel and replenish. Annoyed, Horrocks ordered Renton to send a squadron of Crusader tanks back to the area just south of the 2nd New Zealand Division position. Whether Horrocks was right in this particular dispute matters less, for this discussion, than the fact that the new corps commander momentarily lost his composure, something he surely regretted.

That slip-up aside, the battle still unfolded as predicted. By 1100 hours, Horrocks's staff had identified the vehicles of the 15th Panzer Division and 21st Panzer Division of the Deutsches Afrika Korps, which had breached the minefields and were now approximately eight to ten miles south and southwest of Point 102. Getting there had not been easy for the Germans either. While they were delayed west of the minefields, the 7th Armoured Division and the Desert Air Force had pounded the DAK, wounding the corps commander,

Major-General Walther Nehring, and killing the commander of the 21st Panzer Division, Major-General George von Bismarck.<sup>103</sup> With 200-plus enemy tanks south of the gap between the 2nd New Zealand Division and the 22nd Armoured Brigade, Horrocks “telephoned General Montgomery and asked him to release the 23rd Arm[oure]d B[riga]de.”<sup>104</sup> Monty kept three squadrons of tanks in the 30th Corps sector, but he released the remainder of the brigade to Horrocks, who in turn sent 100 Valentine tanks to pre-dug tank run-up positions between the 2nd New Zealand Division and the ninety-two Grants of the 22nd Armoured Brigade. He now “felt reasonably confident of the outcome of the battle as all my armour was well positioned to defend the ground vital to the defence – Alam el Halfa.”<sup>105</sup>

With the enemy thus contained in the bowl, it remained only to keep him there and to kill as many Germans as possible. At midday on 31 August, the DAK had halted to refuel, but Rommel’s intentions were still unclear. Would he continue to the east and try to take the Alam Halfa position from behind? Or would he turn left and drive north, straight at the Alam Halfa position? An afternoon dust storm prevented the Desert Air Force from engaging Rommel’s tanks. It also obscured the enemy from view and prevented Horrocks and the rest of 13th Corps from divining his intentions, so Roberts deployed two of his light squadrons “up to five miles south and south-west” of Point 102 to regain contact with the advancing enemy. At 1530, the squadrons reported a “strong force of enemy tanks” moving northeast.<sup>106</sup> For a while, it looked as though Rommel might be executing the long envelopment, and Roberts relayed the reports to Gatehouse and Horrocks, who were sitting next to each other. Concerned that the enemy would bypass Point 102 and possibly encircle Alam Halfa Ridge from the east, Gatehouse warned Roberts: “I don’t want you to think we are in a blue funk here or anything like that, but if these fellows [the DAK] continue on as they are doing you will have to come out and hit them in the flank.”<sup>107</sup> Roberts issued warning orders to two of his regiments to execute such a flank attack, but it proved unnecessary, as Horrocks recalled: “The critical point in the battle came at about [1745] on the 31st August when they delivered their initial attack on the 22nd Arm[oure]d B[riga]de.”<sup>108</sup> By then, the DAK tanks had halted their eastern advance, turned north, and started advancing slowly on Point 102 and the Alam Halfa Ridge. Sometime around 1900, they collided with Roberts’s tanks and anti-tank guns, all of which had held their fire until the enemy was well within 1,000 yards. The Germans managed one breach in the brigade’s defences, but Roberts held them off by calling in the artillery fire of all available guns and repositioning his depth regiment to plug the gap. Before last light, his troops had destroyed a total of twenty-four German tanks while sustaining seventeen tank casualties of their own.<sup>109</sup> With darkness

blanketing the battlefield, the DAK limped its way to the Ragil Depression, where the Desert Air Force bombarded tanks and motor transport. These incessant attacks also had the added benefit of subjecting DAK soldiers to their second sleepless night in a row. All British arms were doing their part and Horrocks was pleased – and relieved: “This fateful day, 31st August, had gone well for us and the crisis was over.”<sup>110</sup>

That did not mean he could relax, however. Horrocks knew Rommel would not give up that easily and he still had to hold his position “without getting unduly mauled.” He ordered Gatehouse to bring the 8th Armoured Brigade forward from the east so that it would make contact with the 22nd Armoured Brigade’s left flank, close the bowl further, and “block the wide encircling movement, the other alternative Rommel might adopt.”<sup>111</sup> The 4th Light Armoured Brigade in the south continued to harass the enemy. Its Stuart and Crusader tanks may not have been capable of killing the German Mark IIIs or Mark IVs, but they were “excellent for shooting up German soft vehicles” and fuel trucks, which they did.<sup>112</sup> The morning after the initial assault of 31 August, Horrocks visited Roberts at Point 102, to get a better appreciation for the battle at the main point of enemy attack and also to assure Roberts that, despite his seventeen tank casualties from the previous day’s fighting, all was well. While enduring the insult of a shelling by British 25-pounders that the Germans had captured earlier in the summer, he advised Roberts of all the latest friendly moves to seal the bowl, assuring the young brigadier that “Monty [had] the whole thing in hand.”<sup>113</sup> Neither the shelling nor the gravity of this decisive battle put the actor off his game. Commenting on the effect of the visit, Roberts remembered that Horrocks had “that wonderful knack of inspiring confidence and enthusiasm, wherever he [went], and the raised morale he [left] behind quickly [spread] to those he [had] not even seen.” Roberts still had a fight on his hands though. Because the 8th Armoured Brigade had slammed into a German anti-armour screen before it could reach the left flank of his brigade, the 15th Panzer Division was able to mount an attack against his easternmost positions. This was the most Rommel could muster due to critical fuel shortages. The attack failed. With an uncertain supply of fuel, with no hope of breaking through the enemy defences before Montgomery or Horrocks could counter him, and with the moral and physical effects of aerial bombardment taking their toll on his troops, Rommel decided late on 1 September to break off offensive operations.<sup>114</sup> The following day, he gave orders for a phased withdrawal back to positions west of the minefields. Roberts had done the job expected of him.

Other subordinates proved more like Renton, questioning and less cordial. On 1 September, Montgomery ordered Horrocks to attack southward with the 2nd New Zealand Division, from Alam Nayil, to the depression at Deir el

Munassib, and then to Qaret el Himeimat. This would cut Rommel's lines of communication, but arranging the manoeuvre was not as simple as passing an order to Freyberg, who was not one to remain reticent when he harboured objections.<sup>115</sup> Freyberg believed that removing troops from his intricately connected defensive position would surely affect the ability of the New Zealanders to defend against the enemy now poised to the west and east of his position. When Freyberg suggested that all he could spare for the attack was a battalion group, Horrocks asked him to consider that the advance should be conducted by at least one of the two New Zealand brigades. To allay Freyberg's concerns, he promised another infantry brigade – the 5th Indian Brigade – and some armoured support. Loath to remove his troops from their current task – in fact, loath to conduct the attack at all because he had been caught in the open against Rommel's tanks only a month earlier<sup>116</sup> – Freyberg proposed that the 5th Indian Brigade be used for the attack. This was definitely not what either Montgomery or Horrocks had intended, however. They had agreed to give Freyberg the 5th Indian Brigade so that he might free up one of his experienced New Zealand Brigades for the assault. Freyberg knew this, and it is difficult to escape the conclusion that he was simply playing dumb at this stage, which must have been trying for Horrocks. The corps commander maintained his composure, however, and continued to work through the problem. After conferring with his brigadiers on 2 September, Freyberg suggested that the assault be conducted by at least two brigades – a sensible suggestion given that a single brigade advance would have produced a narrow three-mile salient, vulnerable to counterattack by German armour. Horrocks agreed with the rationale, although he originally objected to the use of the 132nd Brigade, newly arrived and detached from the 44th (Home Counties) Division, because he was uneasy about the untested formation's ability to conduct offensive operations. After some discussion, Horrocks acceded to Freyberg's proposal on the grounds that leaving the 132nd out of the attack would have complicated greatly the number of reliefs-in-place that had to be conducted.<sup>117</sup>

Unfortunately, the corps commander's original misgivings about the 132nd Brigade proved justified. While the 5th New Zealand Brigade managed to capture its first-phase objectives on the night of 3-4 September, the 132nd Brigade crossed the start line an hour late, failed to reach its first objectives some two miles south of Alam Nayil, and suffered a staggering 697 casualties.<sup>118</sup> The attacks having failed in the face of vicious German resistance and counterattacks, Freyberg recommended the withdrawal of both brigades, lest the 5th New Zealand Brigade remain isolated and stranded. His much-irritated corps commander agreed. Horrocks made no mention of his difficulties with Freyberg in his memoir – he was too much of a gentleman for that – but, to an official

© UBC Press 2011

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without prior written permission of the publisher, or, in Canada, in the case of photocopying or other reprographic copying, a licence from Access Copyright, [www.accesscopyright.ca](http://www.accesscopyright.ca).

21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11      5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Canada on FSC-certified ancient-forest-free paper (100% post-consumer recycled) that is processed chlorine- and acid-free.

### Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

---

Delaney, Douglas E. (Douglas Edward), 1964-

Corps commanders : five British and Canadian generals at war, 1939-1945 /

Douglas E. Delaney.

(Studies in Canadian military history, 1499-6251)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7748-2089-9

1. Generals – Canada – Biography. 2. Generals – Great Britain – Biography. 3. Canada. Canadian Army – Officers – Biography. 4. Great Britain. Army – Officers – Biography. 5. World War, 1939-1945 – Canada – Biography. 6. World War, 1939-1945 – Great Britain – Biography. I. Title. II. Series: Studies in Canadian military history

D768.15.D44 2011

940.53'71

C2010-908003-3

---

### Canada

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Aid to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Publication of this book has been financially supported by the Canadian War Museum.

Printed and bound in Canada by Friesens

Set in Helvetica Condensed and Minion by Artegraphica Design Co. Ltd.

Copy editor: Frank Chow

Proofreader: Jenna Newman

Indexer: Patricia Buchanan

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

[www.ubcpress.ca](http://www.ubcpress.ca)