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Looking at Command

Military Command has always required technical skill and spiritual power and quality; both are essential. The great commanders in history have been those who had a profound knowledge of the mechanics of war and the stage-management of battles, and who were able to focus and call forth the spirit and qualities of their soldiers.

Field-Marshal the Viscount Montgomery of Alamein[1]

By almost any measure, Major-General Bertram Meryl Hoffmeister was the most successful Canadian battlefield commander of the Second World War. No Canadian officer spent more time in combat.[2] With few respites, Hoffmeister confronted the enemy from the Allied landings on Sicily in July 1943 to the victory in Northwest Europe in May 1945. During that time, he fought six battles as a battalion commander, four as a brigadier, and eight in command of an armoured division.[3] With one, possibly two, exceptions, all his actions succeeded. He earned three Distinguished Service Orders – one at each of battalion, brigade, and division levels of command. He was made a Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire for piercing the Gothic Line. And, after his division's sweep out of the Arnhem bridgehead in April 1945, Hoffmeister was admitted as a Companion of the Most Honourable Order of Bath. So impressed were Canadian military authorities, they saw fit to appoint the Vancouver native commander of the Canadian contingent in the war against Japan.

This would have been an extraordinary record of success for a soldier who had spent a lifetime in uniform. That it belongs to a man who started the war as a poorly trained militia captain whose most formative experiences had been in the world of business is truly remarkable. Only three officers from Canada's Non-Permanent Active Militia – Hoffmeister, A.B. Matthews, and R.H. (Holly) Keefler – commanded divisions in action. Of those, only Hoffmeister and Matthews could be regarded as truly successful. Two others, Victor Odlum and C.B. Price, although appointed to divisional command overseas, were relieved before taking their formations into action. Arthur Potts, Hardy Ganong, and P.E. Leclerc went on to command divisions in Canada after being removed from brigade command in England. Hoffmeister was an exception.[4]

Surprisingly, Canadian military historians have had little to say about Hoffmeister. What little they have written has tended to be tangential to operational histories, focusing on tactics and doctrine at the formation level.[5] Several

studies, for example, have looked at the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade's (2 CIB) struggle for the Italian town of Ortona,[6] and a few others have probed the actions of the 5th Canadian Armoured Division (5 CAD) in the battles of the Liri Valley and the Gothic Line.[7] But none have been specifically devoted to the study of Hoffmeister as a military commander. This work is the first.

Despite his exceptional war record and his rapid advancement in rank, Hoffmeister did not become an able military commander overnight. His story is anything but a confirmation of the old militia myth, which purported that Canadians, inherently rugged and conditioned by their harsh environment, only needed a healthy dose of once-weekly military training to prepare them for war whenever it came.[8] He did not glide from business to the battlefield, nor did he move up the command ladder without stumbling. He worked at it – and worked at it hard – every step of the way. When, as a militia captain, he joined the Canadian Active Service Force in the autumn of 1939, he joined an army that was ill prepared to give him what he needed most: effective training. For a young self-starter, that was disappointing. Indeed, personal and professional frustration characterized the better part of his first two years in England. But, eventually, as the Canadian Army and its training practices improved, so did Hoffmeister, but the process was gradual. In fact, Hoffmeister's military acumen was the culmination of a lifetime of character development and learning. Family, sports, business experience, military training, and, most of all, combat: all of these contributed to some degree or other. Only by examining *how* he exercised command at the various levels of command does the extent of each of these influences become clear.

Of course, any analysis of command is fraught with difficulties. To begin with, the term "command" has several different connotations. As a noun, it can refer to the exercise or tenure of authority vested in an individual ("the officer addressed the soldiers in his command") or it can mean the actual order given by the controlling authority ("the officer gave the command to advance"). As a verb, it can denote something that authoritatively requires attention ("this problem commands your attention") or it can mean the direction or leadership of subordinates ("he commanded his men to advance"). This book is concerned with the last of these definitions. In other words, the primary focus of this study is *how* Hoffmeister, as a military commander, did his business – how he organized and employed the men and resources under his authority.

But even with that focus, analyzing command is no simple matter. As the quotation from Field-Marshal Montgomery at the beginning of this chapter states, the exercise of command requires the ability to direct and to inspire, to lead and to manage, to coordinate and to motivate, to think and to feel. Few works capture these subtle dichotomies; many confuse them. Martin Van Crevald, for example, consciously excluded "moral forces" as a function of command in order to give rigour to his analysis of the organizations, systems, and technologies that commanders have used throughout the ages.[9] In a more theoretical vein, Ross Pigeau

and Carol McCann have offered an over-intellectualized perspective based on the relationship between the components of *competence, responsibility,* and *authority,* while Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Bradley has boiled the matter down to the twin activities of *leadership* and *management.*[10] Some, such as Martin Blumenson and James L. Stokesbury, have rejected such abstract approaches: "Since man is the only creature who defies wholly quantifiable terms, since each historical event, no matter how similar to one of the past, is still unique, there is no formula, and therefore no science."[11] If the existing literature makes anything clear, it is that the exercise of command is neither wholly art, nor wholly science; hence the underlying dichotomies. What Field-Marshal Montgomery termed "technical skills" – tactical analysis, decision making, planning, direction, monitoring, supervision – can be gauged or measured in some degree, and are therefore more "scientific." On the other hand, the ability to call forth the spirit and qualities of soldiers, to make them do willingly, and in the face of danger, what is necessary to achieve a military goal, defies quantification and is therefore more of an art.

What can be loosely termed the human and technical dimensions of command are not only interrelated, they are interdependent. All the charm and influence in the world, for example, cannot guarantee the success of a poorly conceived and inadequately managed plan. Conversely, even the most brilliant of plans flounders if not executed by enthusiastic, willing, and well-trained subordinates. Montgomery understood this. In his 1961 book, *The Path to Leadership,* he explained that a leader needed both:

> A thorough knowledge of his job, of his profession is an absolute pre-requisite; and then a never-ending study to keep himself up-to-date ...
>
> A leader must also have a genuine interest in, and a real knowledge of humanity – which will always be the raw material of his trade. He must understand that bottled-up in men are great emotional forces and these must have an outlet in a way which is positive and constructive and which will warm their hearts and excite their imagination. If this can be done and the forces can be harnessed and directed towards a common purpose, the greatest achievements become possible. But if the approach to this human problem is cold and impersonal, little can be achieved.[12]

Such complexities should remain foremost in any analysis of command.

The historian trying to appreciate how a general exercised command must consider a variety of sources. The technical dimension of command is predominantly rational, and the human dimension is predominantly non-rational; information about each of these dimensions is found in different types of evidence. The more rational aspects of military command – intelligence gathering, tactical analysis, decision making, direction, and coordination among them – can be analyzed by considering battle plans, doctrine, weapons' capabilities, command structures, force ratios, or schemes of manoeuvre. Such things are best discovered in the

documentary evidence of written battle estimates, orders, and correspondence and, therefore, offer at least some quantifiable criteria by which to study the commander. However, the less rational aspect of calling forth the spirit and qualities of soldiers, because it implies willing, even emotional, compliance on the part of the follower, cannot be quantified with any certainty.

This is the essential difficulty: while the commander may undertake certain actions to harness those "great emotional forces" better, only the performance of the followers will testify to the commander's success. The reason for this is plain – leaders do not exist without the led. Oftentimes the decision of the soldier to follow is rational. Just as often, however, it is non-rational. For example, on a rational level, the follower may do what a leader orders because the consequences of inaction, whether disciplinary or the result of enemy action, are so grave. On a non-rational level, the follower may take a certain action because of an attachment to the leader, or to avoid letting leader, peers, and country down. This is what Field-Marshal Sir William Slim referred to as "that intangible force which will move a whole group of men to give their last ounce to achieve something, without counting the cost to themselves; that makes them feel they are part of something greater than themselves."[13] This is a key element of success in command, something the best commanders cultivate. In analyzing how a commander commanded, consideration must therefore be given to *how* and *why* subordinates did what they did.

The perspective of subordinates is important. Too frequently, historians have dismissed the reminiscences of soldiers as anecdotal, unscientific, and, therefore, unimportant. They have derided interviews conducted more than a few days after a combat action as unreliable because, for a variety of reasons, such evidence tends to be inaccurate in terms of details or the sequencing of events.[14] That is true; but, at the same time, that is not what makes interviews and memoirs useful. An example or two demonstrate their worth.

One soldier, who won a Military Medal for his action in the Battle of Agira in July 1943, recently confessed that, despite the assistance of maps and a visit to the same Sicilian hills where he had distinguished himself some fifty-seven years earlier, he could not recall the sequence of events that earned him the award. Given the passage of time, this is understandable. He was, however, able to recount the occasion of his being awarded the decoration by Montgomery. What remains clear in the old soldier's mind is the memory of Montgomery pinning the medal on his chest and then fastening an errant button afterward.[15] This is a small point, some would say insignificant, but it illustrates just how profoundly a commander can affect a subordinate. No soldier forgets an encounter with a commanding general.

Will R. Bird's First World War memoir, *Ghosts Have Warm Hands,* related the positive impression that Major-General Louis J. Lipsett's frequent visits to the front-line trenches left on Bird and his fellow soldiers: "He was nearer to us than any brass hat, being often in the trenches. I had never heard a man speak against him, and I had my own memory of running into him in the trench that night during

1917."[16] The eminent military historian Sir Michael Howard similarly believed that just hearing the news that the commander of the Allied Armies in Italy, General Sir Harold Alexander, had landed on the precarious Salerno beachhead in September 1943 steadied him and his hard-pressed comrades in the Coldstream Guards.[17]

Conversely, the absence of a commanding general can have the opposite affect. W.H.A. Groom's vituperative memoir of the Great War conveyed something of why the British Army's morale sagged so much in 1917: "In twenty months [at the front] I saw our brigadier once only ... They knew nothing about the conditions and were completely out of contact with the men."[18]

All of this says that impressions count, by lasting longer in memory than facts, by filling in the human dimension, and by giving us a more complete, more balanced understanding of command. As Montgomery expounded: "Military command is, fundamentally a great human problem and no good results will follow unless there is mutual confidence and sympathy between the known commander and the regimental officers and men – the former being seen frequently in the forward area by the soldiery."[19] Even if the accuracy of interviews or memoirs does not match contemporary sources, such as personal journals, war diaries, and operations logs, the impressions they do reflect, particularly as they pertain to commanders, are important.

It stands to reason that all evidence must be weighed, cross-referenced, and compared in order to cobble together the most accurate representation of the events and their causes. In piecing together the events, contemporary documents are unquestionably more valuable than the more filtered, and sometimes sanitized, sources of war diaries, memoirs, and interviews conducted long after the events. Still, in dealing with command, it would be a mistake to focus solely on what a soldier did, to the exclusion of any examination of why he did it. That would be as unbalanced as relying solely on interviews. A comprehensive analysis of command – which involves a relationship between the commander and the commanded – must give equitable consideration to both the technical and human dimensions of command, and to the different types of evidence that support each.

That no historian has undertaken a major study of Hoffmeister as a military commander should come as no surprise. Studies of Canadian commanders are rare. Unlike their American or British counterparts, few of Canada's Second World War generals have captured the attention of historians. Only A.G.L. McNaughton, H.D.G. Crerar, and G.G. Simonds have been the subject of major works,[20] while others such as E.L.M. Burns, A.B. Matthews, M.A. Pope, K. Stuart, and Hoffmeister have received only minor treatment.[21]

The only examination specifically devoted to Hoffmeister as a military commander appeared in J.L. Granatstein's *The Generals,* a collective biography that looks at Canada's Second World War generals as a group.[22] It is a short narrative, thirteen pages in a chapter shared with Matthews, but here we get a quick look at

a true exception in a group of "pallid, colourless figures."[23] Here we see a battlefield commander with good technical skills *and* remarkable ability to motivate soldiers – all in an officer who had not spent a lifetime in the profession of arms.[24] Granatstein sought to make the exception understandable by giving us a brief glimpse of Hoffmeister's background – his upbringing in interwar Vancouver, his cadet experience, his life as a militia officer, his wartime training, and his personal crises. More important, he raised a number of questions that too often have been unasked. How did this commander motivate his soldiers and staff officers? How did they respond to him? And still more questions need asking. How exactly did Hoffmeister acquire the skills to command an armoured division in battle when others proved incapable of doing the same? How did he make his decisions? The roots of Hoffmeister's technical acumen require further investigation as well.

That is the central purpose of this book: to look at *how* Hoffmeister did his business as military commander. It is not to judge him, merely to look at what he did, how he did it, and how he learned to do it. As such, it examines command in a manner that has not hitherto been done. Arguing that the exercise of command has both human and technical dimensions, this book attempts to achieve greater balance than exists in the current literature. It builds on the existing scholarship that has established the state of pre-war training, the influence of doctrine, and the combat experience of the Canadian Army between 1943 and 1945. It uses a wide array of evidence and sources, including contemporary documents, war diaries, personal journals, memoirs, and interviews. And it analyzes what is impossible to quantify: the human element. The testimonies of subordinates is accorded greater weight than has previously been the case, not so much for their recollection of events but for soldiers' impressions of their commander and of how their relationship with him affected their performance. Factors that influenced Hoffmeister's abilities to stage-manage battles and tap into the talent and energy of subordinates – his family, his childhood, his education, his civilian work experience, his military training, and his years of combat experience – are presented and probed in a biographical narrative, restricted to the general's military career and the antecedents that affected it.

There is a second purpose of this book, and that is simply to chronicle the military career of a remarkable soldier about whom most Canadians – soldier, scholar, citizen – know very little. In a way, that may be the real value of this work. It addresses that most important, yet most forgotten, purpose of history: to tell a story.