

Canadian Military History

Volume 4 | Issue 1

Article 16

1-23-2012

Ike and Monty: Generals at War by Norman Gelb [Review]

J.L. Granatstein
York University

Recommended Citation

Granatstein, J.L. (1995) "*Ike and Monty: Generals at War* by Norman Gelb [Review]," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 16.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol4/iss1/16>

This Feature is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

ships, some remarkable new portraits of corvettes (like *Sackville*) and one of the dummy wooden gun fitted to *Trillium* for her first Atlantic crossing.

Johnston has also gone to considerable effort to make this book 'accessible' to the novice, explaining how things like asdic, depth charges and radar worked and were operated, and what various officers and petty officers were responsible for. In the process he has recorded for posterity much arcane information which will soon be hard, if not impossible, to retrieve. Indeed, its hard to under estimate the importance of the information recorded in *Corvettes Canada* that would otherwise have been lost—and it is sobering to reflect on what has already been carried to the grave or discarded by dis-interested or ill-informed executors of estates.

Collective memoirs are not always successful and works by amateur historians are often flawed by their failure to keep abreast of the historical writing in their field. Neither of these criticisms can be applied to *Corvettes Canada*. Johnston has woven the memories of 250 Old Salts from 50 different ships and the history of the wartime RCN into a tight fabric, one that is both entertaining and extremely valuable. If you have never read anything on the Canadian navy's part in the Battle of the Atlantic start with this one: if you've read everything that's already available you will find this one a gem.

Marc Milner
University of New Brunswick

* * * * *

Ike and Monty

Norman Gelb. *Ike and Monty: Generals at War*, New York: William Morrow & Co., 1994, 480 pp. \$25 US.

The clash of personalities and war, just as in the song in "Our Town," go together like "love and marriage," and as Dad was told by mother, "you don't get one without the other." Too bad, for sometimes the vicious infighting between Allied commanders was such as to put the purpose of the conflict in doubt. An American writer living in Britain with several books on the Second World War to his credit, Norman Gelb might seem the ideal writer to try to explore the relationship between Montgomery and Eisenhower, and in some ways he is.

Of his evenhandedness there can be little doubt as he assigns blame and praise with practised ease, sparing neither of his two subjects. Montgomery treated his son appallingly, shuffling him off to acquaintances during the war, while Eisenhower cheated on his wife, the boring, absent Mamie. Ike lost control of strategic operations in North Africa and Sicily, but Montgomery was so obsessed with the driving need to be right and to persuade everyone that he was so that he managed to persuade himself he held no responsibility whatsoever for the Dieppe debacle. Gelb makes the case that Eisenhower had no real sense of strategy, not least for his plans to invade France in 1942 that he prepared for George C. Marshall, and no real grasp of political reality as he demonstrated with his botching of the affaire *Giraud* and his inability to see the importance of Berlin. Was Montgomery any better than his rival? Not really, Gelb argues. As a tactician, he excelled in the set-piece battle, but his broader battlefield conceptions often neglected the reality that he had allies with politico-military aspirations of their own, and he had the political sense of a newt. "In defeat, unbeatable," wags said of the Field Marshal; "in victory unbearable."

Inevitably the two fought and argued. Montgomery could not bear that the militarily untried Eisenhower was his superior, and Ike, his affability masking a tension that all but ate him up, could never quite figure out how to make the little Anglo-Irishman work in harness. "Monty is a good man to serve under," Eisenhower said once, "a difficult man to serve with; and an impossible man to serve over." Even that misspoke matters. Monty was impossible to serve under unless one was an acolyte, a disciple willing to sup at the great man's table and adopt his pearls of wisdom as gospel truth. You were either for Montgomery or a bitter enemy, in other words. Guy Simonds was quick to get on side; Harry Crerar tried, but his responsibilities as a national commander got in the way, and he could never quite master the art of sucking up to the impossible little man.

Still, Montgomery was the best British trainer of the war and the first British commander to win a major battle in a war that had been marked only by a string of disasters. El Alamein was a relatively small scale battle but a critical one; North Africa was ponderously handled; Sicily was a cause of friction with the Americans; and Italy was again plodding in the extreme. Nonetheless, his handling of the Normandy battle, or so Gelb argues, was the most important Allied victory of the war. Monty foolishly spoiled his triumph by claiming that everything—yes, everything—from the beaches to Falaise had proceeded precisely according to plan when manifestly it had not, but that grotesque flaw in a rigid, frigid personality does not really take away from his accomplishment in the field.

Gelb's book is based on a mass of secondary material and a surprisingly light skim over the British and American primary

sources. His prose is workmanlike, though the super-simplistic way he tells his story will be jarring to all but the completely uninitiated. Nor is he expert on British, Canadian and Newfoundland realities, putting the Argentia meeting of August 1941 in Canada and calling brigadiers "generals."

Still, this is a good, fair treatment of a pair of controversial military personalities that fifty years later has had more partisans than analysts. In this account, if Ike comes out just a bit ahead, he probably deserves to do so. Eisenhower was no great strategist, but he built an Anglo-American team (why were there no Canadians on it?) and made it function. Montgomery, grudgingly part of that team, a tiresome, tireless goad of his designated master, nonetheless had to obey orders or in the final analysis face dismissal. He chose to go along to get ahead, and he ended the war a field marshal and the Empire's hero. He was a "nasty little shit" to many of those who had to serve under him, while no one would ever speak in such harsh, almost dismissive terms of Eisenhower, a man who won and held the personal affection and admiration of almost all who worked for him. It was difficult to be anti-American under Ike, but all too easy to curse the bloody Brits around Monty. That Gelb makes this clear is his accomplishment.

J.L. Granatstein
York University

* * * * *

Fantassin

Charly Forbes. *Fantassin: pour mon pays, la gloire et...des prunes*. Sillery: Les Editions du Septentrion, 1994, 451 pages.

Les Editions du Septentrion merit commendation for undertaking the publication of war-related material by or about French-Canadians. They have also taken to translating books from English to French so that some Desmond Morton is now available to those whose workaday language is French. Léon Balcer's memoirs, including reminiscences of service in the Battle of the Atlantic, appeared in 1988. More recently there came a title dealing with the Cold War and, in quick succession, Gabriel Taschereau's anecdotes of service with 425 Squadron in Bomber Command and, more significantly, the posthumously published diary of Georges Verreault's time with the Royal Rifles of Canada including his years as a prisoner-of-war following the Hong Kong debacle. Now the French-reading public can share in the reminiscences of a well-known character who has left impressive imprints from Gaspé, through Norman fields, Dutch polders, Korean hills and countless points between. He is Joseph Jean-Charles Bertrand Forbes, popularly known as Charly.

Charly, unfortunately, is the victim of poor editing especially concerning the transcription of English in the French text. There are far too many mistakes which should have been spotted prior to publication by an attentive proofreader with a solid background in English. I have had to make similar comments in the past when it came to the use of French in English texts. Why such an anomaly should persist only in Canada is an area perhaps worth investigating. It is not a problem in the United States nor in the U.K. or in France or, even, in Australia. These countries seem to take pride in reproducing any other language in the proper grammatical manner out of a sense of pride, accuracy and respect. Forbes is not to blame in this area but his editors are. His

memory, however, lets him down so that song lyrics, titles and popular sayings are often misquoted.

Another problem concerns historical accuracy. Forbes is no historian. Moreover, he was obviously in something of a hurry to publish so that his recollections of the past are often erroneous. Careful verification by experts would have prevented the making of statements that are plainly false either because they proceed from hearsay or from an occasionally confused and faulty memory. His claim that HMCS *Matane* sank a German U-boat off Halifax in 1944 is groundless. Though losses were terrible, there were not 4,000 Canadian casualties at Dieppe nor did the raid (19 August 1942) precede Barbarossa (22 June 1941). There were no amphibious tanks in the raid. Georges Vanier, the subject of two hilarious and verifiable anecdotes, did not lose his leg at Courcellette but at Chérisy in August 1918.

Such shortcomings would normally seriously undermine the quality of a book. Two factors militate against this: the narrator's personality and his extraordinary abilities as a storyteller. Putting it on paper required help from a friend and former subaltern of Forbes' in the Royal 22e Régiment who is finishing a teaching career at CMR in 1995. With the help of Professor Guy Provost, Charly's "memoires" are so eminently readable that the reader becomes completely engrossed in the adventures of this extraordinary man.

Anyone who has known Forbes can attest to the fact that he is not your run-of-the-mill fellow. He is multi-talented: intelligent, physically impressive. He paints and sings well, plays the violin, is quick-witted and fiercely proud. His courage has been proven time and time again in the most trying circumstances. Like so many others like him, he is quick to judge incompetence,