

# In Carthage ruins: the illness of Sir Winston Churchill at Carthage, December 1943

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*History & Humanities*

## Abstract

This paper reviews Churchill's illness in Carthage in December 1943. It was characterised by fever that lasted 6 days, left lower lobe pneumonia and two episodes of atrial fibrillation. He was managed in a private villa by Lord Moran, his personal physician, with the assistance of two nurses and the expert advice of colleagues. Sulphadiazine and digitalis leaf were prescribed and Churchill recovered. It is remarkable that, despite the severity of his illness, he continued to direct the affairs of State from his bed.

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**Keywords:** Bedford, Buttle, Churchill, Moran, Pulvertaft, Scadding

**Declaration of interests:** JWS is the son of Professor Guy Scadding

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## Introduction

In a press communiqué issued on 30 December 1943 before Churchill left for Marrakesh he wrote, '...I had planned to visit the Italian front as soon as the conferences [Teheran and Cairo] were over, but on December 11 I felt so tired out that I had to ask General Eisenhower for a few days rest before proceeding...' Despite this he also wrote 'I did not at any time relinquish my part in the direction of affairs...'<sup>1</sup>

We review Churchill's illness in detail, assess the clinical impact of his doctors and discuss whether it compromised his ability to direct affairs of state.

## Methods

Information regarding Churchill's illness is available from various sources; foremost from Churchill himself<sup>1,2</sup> and his personal physician, Lord Moran (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> By courtesy of the present Lord Moran and the Wellcome Library, we have also had access to his grandfather's original papers regarding the illness (PP/CMW/F/6/1-5) and been able to confirm the accuracy of the statements quoted from open sources. However, permission to include information not previously in the public domain was not granted.

In addition to these, three other medical men left accounts, two of which were published: Bedford (Figure 2), which was later supplemented for Lord Moran,<sup>4</sup> and Scadding (Figure 3).<sup>5</sup> The Pulvertaft family have generously allowed us to quote from their forebear's (Figure 4) unpublished autobiography and we have consulted the recollections of Pulvertaft, as reported by his relative Rear Admiral DM

**Figure 1** Lord Moran in 1943. Credit: Wellcome Library, London.



Pulvertaft.<sup>8</sup> Gilbert<sup>7-9</sup> (Churchill's main biographer), and Lovell,<sup>10</sup> who had access to Moran's papers and letters to his wife, added further details and there are many general sources.<sup>11-24</sup>

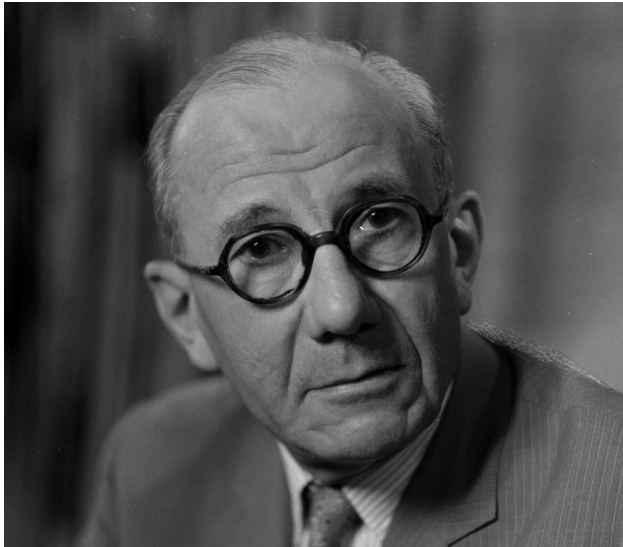
## Churchill's illness

### Saturday 11 December 1943

After the Teheran and Cairo conferences, Churchill left Cairo in an Avro York aeroplane<sup>1,14,15</sup> at 1am to fly to Tunis, a flight of eight and a half hours. The navigator, Squadron Leader Mitchell, recounted how 15 minutes short of landing, Tunis

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**Figure 2** Brigadier Evan Bedford, consulting physician to the British forces in the Middle East and North Africa © Cambridgeshire Collection, Cambridge Central Library, UK



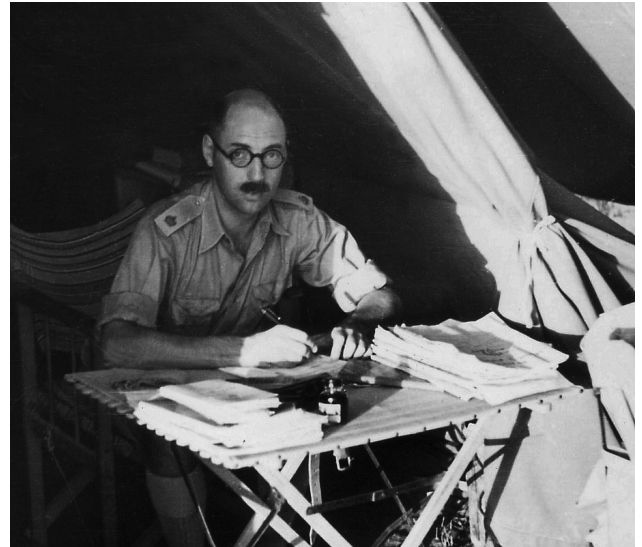
Air Traffic Control stated that El Aouina was closed to all traffic<sup>20</sup> and they must divert to another airfield 10 minutes flying time away. The instruction was complied with but proved unnecessary; El Aouina was indeed closed to all aircraft, except Churchill's.<sup>20,23</sup>

While arrangements were made to fly to El Aouina, Churchill himself admitted that 'As I sat on my official boxes near the machines I certainly did feel completely worn out.'<sup>1</sup> General Sir Alan Brooke (Chief of the Imperial General Staff) wrote, '...they took him [Churchill] out of the plane and he sat on his suitcase in a very cold morning wind...he was chilled through...'<sup>15</sup> The PM 'looked ghastly' Commander Thompson, Churchill's aide-de-camp, noted.<sup>23</sup> Moran reported that Churchill's face, 'shone with perspiration.'<sup>3</sup>

It was about an hour before the York took off again. Moran reported that as Churchill walked very slowly to the aircraft, there was 'a grey look on his face that I did not like.'<sup>3</sup> Once at the correct airfield, where General Eisenhower (Supreme Allied Commander in Europe) and Air Chief Marshall Tedder (Commander of Mediterranean Allied Air Forces) had waited two hours to greet Churchill 'with imperturbable good-humour,'<sup>1</sup> Churchill told Eisenhower, 'I am afraid I shall have to stay with you longer than I had planned. I am completely at the end of my tether and I cannot go on to the front until I have recovered my strength.'

Churchill was accommodated in a house at La Marsa, near Tunis, mainly occupied by Eisenhower and his staff. It was known as the White House, and was a 'large and beautiful villa at sea level',<sup>22</sup> guarded by the US army and the 2nd Battalion Coldstream Guards.<sup>22</sup> It was comprised 'almost entirely of one enormous room facing the sea with French windows. This huge room was packed with service and civilian folk of both sexes. There were two cocktail bars and a blaring record player, shouting dance tunes.' [Pulvertaft RJV. *An Autobiography*, unpublished]

**Figure 3** Lieutenant Colonel Guy Scadding, officer in charge of the medical division of No 19 General Hospital, Fayid, Egypt in 1943 © JW Scadding



Moran observed that Churchill collapsed wearily into the first chair when he arrived,<sup>3</sup> at about 9 am,<sup>22</sup> and after breakfast rested until lunch and spent most of the afternoon resting and sleeping.<sup>15,23</sup> Churchill's own account confirms that he slept all day<sup>1</sup> and Moran noted that Churchill did not seem to have the energy to read the usual telegrams.<sup>3</sup> 'So here I [Churchill] was at this pregnant moment on the broad of my back amid the ruins of ancient Carthage.'<sup>1</sup> However, that night Churchill was able to dine with Eisenhower, Brooke, Moran, Tedder, Commander Thompson, Martin (Principal Private Secretary), and his children Randolph and Sarah.<sup>7</sup>

#### Sunday 12 December 1943

Brooke was 'sleeping like a log' when he was woken at 4am by Churchill in his dragon dressing gown with a brown bandage wrapped round his head.<sup>15</sup> Churchill said he had a bad headache and was looking for Moran.<sup>15</sup> Brooke led him to Moran's room,<sup>15</sup> who woke to find Churchill standing at the foot of his bed.<sup>3</sup> Churchill complained of pain in his throat (just above his collar bone), his skin was hot and his temperature was 101°F (38°C),<sup>3</sup> but there were no abnormal clinical signs when Moran examined his chest.<sup>3</sup>

Churchill thought his symptoms were due to 'a draught in the airplane'<sup>11</sup> and resolved to '...stay in bed and recover for two or three days.'<sup>11</sup> Brooke discussed the diagnosis with Moran who said that as far as he could judge it might be pneumonia or a case of the flu.<sup>15</sup> Sarah Churchill also discussed the possible diagnosis with Lord Moran, 'He is sickening for something, but I do not know what.'<sup>18</sup> Not surprisingly, Moran considered that Churchill was '...in poor shape to face an infection.'<sup>3</sup> 'If he is going to be ill we have nothing here in this God-forsaken spot – no nurses, no milk, not even a chemist.'<sup>3</sup>

Churchill's temperature remained high that night<sup>3</sup> and, as there was no bell in Churchill's room, Moran left Detective Inspector Thompson, Churchill's protection officer, sitting outside the bedroom when he went to bed at about 1 am, telling Thompson to listen to the tempo of Churchill's

**Figure 4** Lieutenant Colonel RJV Pulvertaft, assistant director of pathology, Central Laboratory, Cairo © Rosalind Davies (née Pulvertaft)



breathing and, if there was any sudden alteration, to call him immediately.<sup>17</sup> Thompson remembers hearing Churchill's 'fast, stertorous breathing' and that at about 2 am the sound ceased.<sup>17</sup> Fearing the worst, Thompson crept into Churchill's room and found he was 'breathing quietly and steadily'.<sup>17</sup> Thompson reported this episode to Moran who stated that Churchill 'felt poorly and his pulse was shabby [weak]'.<sup>10</sup> After Moran had turned out the light, thinking Churchill was asleep, Churchill said: 'Don't go away, Charles. Is my pulse all right?'<sup>3</sup> Writing to his wife, Moran confided, 'I sat with him [until] 2–3 am. Then he went to sleep and the temp is now 100.'<sup>10</sup>

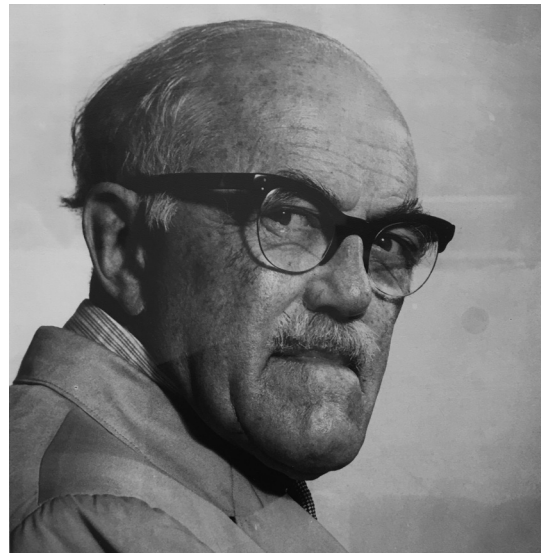
Churchill said to Inspector Thompson, 'I am tired out in body, soul and spirit...(but) all is planned and ready'<sup>17</sup> then, 'In what better place could I die than here – in the ruins of Carthage?'<sup>17</sup> The same sentiment was documented by Churchill himself<sup>1</sup> and expressed to his daughter, Sarah, 'Don't worry, it doesn't matter if I die now, the plans for victory have been laid, it is only a matter of time.'<sup>18</sup>

#### Monday 13 December 1943

At 11 am Churchill's temperature was 99°F (37°C) and he felt better.<sup>3</sup> Pulvertaft and the nurses (Miss Clark and Mrs Haselden<sup>4</sup>) arrived<sup>3</sup> and, on discovering this, Churchill said to Moran, 'Now, Charles, what have you been up to? I'm not ill, and anyway what's wrong with me?'<sup>3</sup>

Pulvertaft found Moran at the door of the villa. 'He was very much concerned. 'I've got Churchill here. He's gravely ill, I want you to examine him'. [Pulvertaft RJV. *An Autobiography*, unpublished] Pulvertaft had brought with him his professional bag, a travelling laboratory he had especially designed in his civilian days, and a microscope and lamp. [Pulvertaft RJV. *An Autobiography*, unpublished] 'I was led to a small room opening off the large one, and saw Churchill in bed. He looked desperately ill; I thought he was dying. I prepared to examine his blood.' [Pulvertaft RJV. *An Autobiography*, unpublished] Pulvertaft took a drop of blood from Churchill's ear. 'That sir was competently done', Churchill said, [Pulvertaft RJV.

**Figure 5** Lieutenant Colonel GAH Buttle, No 1 Base Transfusion Unit, Cairo. © UCL School of Pharmacy



*An Autobiography*, unpublished] gratified that sampling was painless.<sup>7</sup> Pulvertaft found that Churchill's total white cell [leucocyte] count was 9,900 per cubic mm [ $9.9 \times 10^9/L$ ; normal range 4.0–11.0]; sampling was repeated by Pulvertaft daily for 7 days, partly at Churchill's request<sup>3,7</sup> Churchill was interested in the normal white cell count and how the white cells are mobilised in an infection.<sup>3</sup> Churchill also asked Pulvertaft, 'What are eosinophils for?'<sup>25</sup>

Pulvertaft continued, 'When I had finished, I spoke with Moran and told him something of the resources of British medicine in North Africa, and its deficiencies. 'I suggested that Evan Bedford, a top heart man, should come from Cairo and that Buttle [Figure 5] should be got hold of, as he had all the available penicillin.' [Pulvertaft RJV. *An Autobiography*, unpublished]

'No portable x-ray apparatus, or electro-cardiograph and no modern up-to-date drugs' were available [Pulvertaft RJV. *An Autobiography*, unpublished] but the first two were acquired by Pulvertaft within 12 hours from an American hospital in Tunis. Most importantly, sulphadiazine was also obtained. Pulvertaft states, 'It is a remarkable fact that, so far as I know, no credit was ever claimed by any American for their service on that occasion, without which it is not likely that Churchill would have survived.' [Pulvertaft RJV. *An Autobiography*, unpublished]

Pulvertaft's next task was to find a bedside commode for Churchill.<sup>25</sup> Tedder was able to locate one made from packing cases stencilled 'Dried Milk' in an RAF mobile hospital unit about 70 miles away.

Churchill's insistence on seeing Macmillan when he arrived in Tunis at 5.30 pm implies that he had rallied somewhat, though Macmillan observed that Churchill, 'seemed weak and drowsy'.<sup>16</sup> Despite his illness, Churchill continued to work 'at an alarming pace' from his bed, as recalled by Patrick Kinna, Churchill's stenographer.<sup>7</sup> The doctors 'protested about the volume of work being done by the PM – but to no avail'.<sup>7</sup>



### Tuesday 14 December 1943

Moran reported to his wife that Attlee (Deputy Prime Minister) had asked whether he would like Dr Geoffrey Marshall sent out. He declined this offer. Moran sent a message to Mrs Churchill that, 'If I myself were ill in London I would not change this team [of doctors]',<sup>10</sup> though Marshall had provided a second opinion on Churchill's pneumonia in February 1943 and would do so again in August 1944.

Churchill's temperature, pulse, and respiration were rising, the white blood cell count blood was higher, and there were signs of pneumonia at the base of the left lung.<sup>3</sup> The chest X-ray showed a diffuse opacity at the left base, in keeping with the clinical diagnosis.<sup>4</sup>

Churchill stopped Pulvertaft as he left the room after further blood sampling, 'I'm dying, am I not?' he asked. Pulvertaft responded, 'No sir, you are not. I thought you were, but you are on the way up'. Churchill said, 'I don't believe you. Pneumonia, I've got, Osler said it was the old man's friend'. [Pulvertaft RJV. *An Autobiography*, unpublished] Pulvertaft reassured Churchill that, 'Osler had not got sulphadiazine. It's a better friend'. 'Carthage' Churchill said 'Not a bad place...to die'. [Pulvertaft RJV. *An Autobiography*, unpublished] Although there has been controversy over which sulphonamide was prescribed,<sup>26,27</sup> the records of Pulvertaft [Pulvertaft RJV. *An Autobiography*, unpublished] and Bedford<sup>4</sup> make clear it was sulphadiazine. Treatment was commenced at 2.30 pm.

### Wednesday 15 December 1943

This was 'another damp windy day'.<sup>22</sup> Macmillan reported that Moran had told him he thought Churchill was going to die last night. 'He thinks him a little better as regards the pneumonia, but is worried about his heart.'<sup>16</sup>

Churchill wrote to his wife, 'The blood tests this morning were considered satisfactory as indicating healthy but not serious reaction. Temperature between 101 and 102. Doctor Bedford, a high London consultant on circulation and chest, is arriving this afternoon, having been summoned by Moran two days ago. We certainly are not short of any of the talents.'<sup>11</sup> Later in the same transmission, Churchill wrote, 'In case I go to convalesce at Marrakech it might be worthwhile to send out a modest package of painting materials...The days are long and weary.'<sup>11</sup>

Moran had taken the precaution of sending to Tunis for digitalis earlier in the day,<sup>3</sup> which was prescient as at 6 pm Churchill told Moran that, 'My heart is doing something funny – it feels to be bumping all over the place.'<sup>3</sup> He was also very breathless, his pulse was racing and very irregular (atrial fibrillation), the bases of his lungs were congested and the edge of his liver could be felt below the ribs.<sup>3</sup>

Bedford flew from Cairo to Tunis at 7.30 am, not arriving in Carthage until 5.30 pm (his plane had made a forced landing and could not be located [Pulvertaft RJV. *An Autobiography*, unpublished]). Bedford examined Churchill in the presence of Moran and Pulvertaft before 6.30 pm<sup>4</sup> and initiated treatment

with digitalis at 10 pm. Macmillan stated 'Bedford seems sensible and gives us comfort.'<sup>16</sup> The episode of atrial fibrillation lasted 4 hours, and by the following morning, the heart rate had fallen to 96 bpm.<sup>10</sup> Moran noted that, 'A man feels pretty rotten, I imagine, when he fibrillates during pneumonia, but the PM was very good about it.'<sup>3</sup>

Buttle was eventually located in Tunis on his way to Italy. 'He arrived, covered in mud, having had a terrible flight in vile weather in a Mosquito.' [Pulvertaft RJV. *An Autobiography*, unpublished] Macmillan (British Resident Minister in North Africa) was also relieved that, 'At last a Colonel Buttle – the great M & B [May & Baker who made some sulphonamides] specialist – arrived from Italy. He is an expert on how to give the stuff. He seems clever, determined, rather gauche and rude – just the chap we need.'<sup>16</sup> Macmillan begged Buttle to be firm with Churchill and forbid telegrams or visitors.<sup>16</sup> However, Pulvertaft records that although Churchill took an enormous fancy to Buttle, he (Buttle) insisted on flying back that evening to Italy. 'There's a war on there'. [Pulvertaft RJV. *An Autobiography*, unpublished]

Churchill sent a telegram to President Roosevelt, 'Am stranded amid the ruins of Carthage, where you stayed, with fever which has ripened into pneumonia...I hope soon to send you some of the suggestions for the new commands.'<sup>1</sup> Roosevelt responded on the 17 December, 'I am distressed about the pneumonia, and both Harry [Hopkins] and I plead with you to be good and throw it off rapidly...The Bible says you must do just what Moran orders, but at this moment I cannot put my finger on the verse and the chapter...'<sup>1</sup>

This improvement is at odds with the summons Colville, Churchill's Assistant Private Secretary, received on 15 December. 'I received an urgent summons to return to No. 10 in uniform...I discovered that Churchill was seriously, perhaps mortally, ill with pneumonia at Carthage and that I was to escort Mrs Churchill to his bedside.'<sup>13</sup> In fact, Mrs Churchill and Colville were unable to leave the UK until 11.30 am on the 16 December.<sup>13</sup>

At about 5.30 pm on 15 December Scadding was informed that orders had come for him to prepare to fly from Cairo to Tunis in a Lockheed Lodestar that was taking off at 11 pm.<sup>5</sup>

### Thursday 16 December 1943

Scadding was flown through the night, arriving in Tunis at 7 am. He was conveyed in a large American car to Carthage<sup>5</sup> where the first person he met was Bedford, whose house physician he had been 13 years earlier.<sup>5</sup> Bedford had arrived the previous evening and told his colleague that they had been summoned from Egypt at Moran's request.<sup>5</sup>

Moran composed a Medical Bulletin (on 15 December) which he had countersigned by Bedford and Pulvertaft. Attlee read it to the House of Commons on 16 December 'The Prime Minister has been in bed for some days with a cold. A patch of pneumonia has now developed in the left lung. His general condition is as satisfactory as can be expected.'<sup>3</sup> Attlee

advised Members that ‘...highly qualified specialists are in attendance. The House will observe that the bulletin is signed not only by Lord Moran but also by Brigadier Bedford and Lieut. Colonel Pulvertaft, who are Consulting Physician and Director of Pathology respectively to the Middle East Forces. I can assure the House that every modern facility is available on the spot.’<sup>28</sup>

Churchill wrote to his wife, ‘Although yesterday we had a new complication in some heart flutterings, I am able to say today that there is a quite definite improvement at all points and by all tests. My own feeling is that I am at the top of the hill...’<sup>11</sup> This was confirmed by Randolph and Sarah when they wrote to their mother, ‘Papa had excellent night and his condition is much improved.’<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, Martin noted ‘PM distinctly better’<sup>14</sup> and reported to his wife that ‘We have quite an assembly of medical talent.’<sup>7</sup> Macmillan also recorded ‘PM. much better today...cheerful, though rather weak...the experts seem to think he is through the crisis.’<sup>16</sup>

A further Medical Bulletin was issued and signed by Moran, Bedford, and Pulvertaft, ‘The Prime Minister has had a good night. There is some improvement in his general condition.’

#### Friday 17 December 1943

Moran reported that ‘the temperature is settling, and I have stopped the M & B [sulphadiazine].’<sup>3</sup> The Medical Bulletin stated: ‘There has been no spread of the pneumonia, and the improvement in the Prime Minister’s general condition has been maintained.’<sup>3</sup>

Colville and Mrs Churchill landed in Tunis at 3 pm. On arrival at the White House, Churchill sent for Colville, ‘and I found instead of a recumbent invalid, a cheerful figure with a large cigar and a whisky and soda in his hand.’<sup>13</sup>

Churchill himself recalls, ‘One morning [presumably one afternoon] Sarah was absent from her chair...I was about to ask for my box of telegrams...when in she walked with her mother. I had no idea that my wife was flying out from England to join me’<sup>1</sup> This was because Mrs Churchill had asked Sarah not to tell her father.<sup>11</sup>

Mrs Churchill records that, ‘After my arrival I stayed with him until six, when he slept for two hours and I rested too. I then had dinner with him.’<sup>12</sup> At 11 pm Moran came in to say goodnight and intimated he wanted Mrs Churchill, Sarah and Randolph to leave so Churchill could sleep. However, when Mrs Churchill made attempts to go to bed, Churchill would not let her and ‘showed no signs of fatigue’.<sup>12</sup> At 1 am, as she was passing Churchill’s door, Mrs Churchill observed that his light was on and the night nurse suggested she should join Churchill who was enjoying beef tea and ‘feeling very cheerful’.<sup>12</sup>

#### Saturday 18 December 1943

Mrs Churchill joined Churchill for breakfast at 8.30 am. On entering his room, Moran explained that at 3.15 am Churchill had suffered another attack of atrial fibrillation lasting an hour

and a half,<sup>12</sup> though this episode did not distress Churchill as much as the first.<sup>3</sup>

Moran reported further that ‘After six days’ fever the temperature is normal, but when I suggested to the PM. that there was no longer any necessity for a daily blood-count he demurred’.<sup>3</sup> Churchill had insisted every day that he be told not only the total number of white cells but the percentage of the various kinds.<sup>3</sup> Macmillan’s indicator of recovery was different: ‘I judge that he is recovering, because telegrams are beginning to arrive – some rather disturbing!’<sup>17</sup>

Churchill himself was in communication with President Roosevelt, ‘Thank you so much for your telegram. I have hearkened unto the voice of Moran and made good progress, but I am fixed here for another week.’<sup>1</sup> Churchill explained to Roosevelt that he had given much thought to remodelling the commands in consultation with Eisenhower, Alexander, Tedder and Brooke and would now place before Roosevelt the proposals.<sup>1</sup>

#### Sunday 19 December 1943

‘Better weather today, though the gale still blows.’<sup>22</sup> Mrs Churchill reported to her daughter Mary that Churchill had ‘...consented not to smoke, and to drink only weak whisky and soda.’ She also commented that while Churchill enjoyed his lunch and dinner, his appetite was not very good.<sup>12</sup>

After tea, Captain Grey-Turner, Medical Officer of the 2nd Battalion Coldstream Guards, was invited to the White House to see a film and ‘had a talk with Lord Moran’, who was writing a report on the PM’s illness, possibly for the King, Grey-Turner surmised.<sup>22</sup> Subsequently, he had a similar discussion with Bedford who suggested that Churchill had ‘had a fairly narrow squeak, and he [Bedford] didn’t seem too happy about Churchill’s health in the future.’<sup>22</sup>

#### Monday 20 December 1943

‘Now that the PM. is beginning to be convalescent’ Moran wrote ‘he is very difficult – on two occasions he got quite out of hand...he has been savaging Bedford and Scadding, who know their job and have been helpful.’<sup>3</sup> This account has been challenged by Scadding. ‘I did not keep a diary of these events, but I am sure that I should not have forgotten the experience of being ‘savaged’ by Churchill.’<sup>5</sup> Scadding’s recollection is that the conversation recorded by Moran did occur but without the emotional overtones. He was of the view that Moran’s account of it was unfair to Churchill, ‘representing him as being discourteously overbearing.’<sup>5</sup> Scadding explained how many patients with heavy responsibilities demand to be told the evidence on which doctors gave their advice.<sup>5</sup> ‘Bedford and I made the usual replies, in which Moran supported us; but the suggestion that he had to rescue us from Churchill’s rage must be, to say the least, exaggerated.’<sup>5</sup>

Mrs Churchill also reported that Churchill was ‘much better and in very good spirits.’<sup>12</sup> The Churchills breakfasted, lunched and dined together in his bedroom and had ‘lovely talks.’<sup>12</sup>

For security reasons, a VIP villa was rented and ostentatiously guarded by British troops on the outskirts of Cairo<sup>20</sup> and Churchill's Avro York was despatched back to Cairo with no attempt to conceal its arrival. The Axis (Germany, Italy, Japan and their allies) press and radio promptly reported that Churchill was in Cairo!<sup>20</sup> In fact, the only passenger was Scadding<sup>20</sup> who later wrote that he had the privilege of returning in the Avro York 'by day...sitting at Churchill's desk in his comfortable chair...I felt that I was getting the VIP treatment, especially as my orders were to report to the Commander in Chief, British Troops in Egypt, in Cairo, and refuse to answer questions from anyone else.'<sup>15</sup>

#### Tuesday 21 December 1943

Mrs Churchill reported that the night nurse had informed her Churchill had had a very good night.<sup>12</sup> She had been unable to see her husband as Churchill had sent for Kinna to dictate a paper.<sup>12</sup> Moran reported that Churchill 'sat by his bed for an hour today.'<sup>13</sup> Churchill's recovery is also attested to by Macmillan. 'The PM. is recovering – rather too rapidly!'<sup>16</sup>

When Mrs Churchill returned to the villa after a sightseeing tour of the Tunis battlefields with, among others, Moran, she found her husband sitting up in bed looking 'very pink and mischievous' after a hot bath which he had taken with Bedford's consent.<sup>12</sup> Mrs Churchill added when writing to her children, 'Your father has taken a great deal of trouble to seduce Dr Bedford, and Lord Moran is quite jealous.'<sup>12</sup>

#### Wednesday 22 December 1943

Churchill was telephoning Macmillan in Algiers almost hourly.<sup>16</sup>

#### Thursday 23 December 1943

The Medical Bulletin, signed by Moran and Bedford, read, 'The Prime Minister continues to make steady progress.' Mrs Churchill recorded, 'very good progress'.<sup>12</sup> Martin recorded, 'PM out walking on terrace.'<sup>15</sup>

#### Friday 24 December 1943

'There was a great influx of Generals and others to discuss Operation SHINGLE...The PM. rose from his sick bed to hold a conference in the dining-room.'<sup>13</sup>

#### Saturday, 25 December 1943

Churchill began the day with a two-hour conference involving British and US senior military staff in his bedroom. It was then time to celebrate Christmas. Macmillan flew in from Algiers and found Churchill and assembled guests sitting down to a magnificent Christmas dinner, with soup, turkey, plum pudding and champagne!<sup>16</sup> Macmillan recalls that Churchill presided at the festive gathering clothed in a padded silk Chinese dressing-gown decorated with blue and gold dragons<sup>16</sup> (Figure 6) and Commander Thompson recalls the striking pair of bedroom slippers which bore Churchill's initials in gold across each foot.<sup>24</sup> Churchill proposed a series of toasts 'in the best Russian style', with a short speech in each case.<sup>16</sup> Macmillan was gratified that Churchill proposed his 'in most eulogistic terms'.<sup>16</sup> Martin also noted in his diary, 'Festive

**Figure 6** Churchill, dressed in his siren suit and dressing gown, stands beside General Eisenhower on Christmas Day 1943 © IWM (NA 10074)



lunch with toasts à la Russe.'<sup>14</sup> Moran wrote to his wife, 'PM. in great form. Proposed health of Bedford and me (M & B). I replied that when in difficulty we had another consultant at hand, himself (much appreciated by everyone who knows his interfering nature).'<sup>10</sup>

That evening a large cocktail party hosted by Sarah Churchill merged into a stand-up cold dinner and 'everybody finished the day feeling the merrier for Christmas.'<sup>13</sup> Churchill attended 'as if in perfect health'<sup>13</sup> and 'in sparkling form, working the room in his dressing gown and slippers.'<sup>20</sup>

#### Sunday 26 December 1943

Moran had agreed that Churchill could leave Carthage after Christmas but insisted he must have three weeks' convalescence. 'And where could be better than the lovely villa at Marrakesh, where the President and I had stayed after Casablanca a year before?' wrote Churchill later.<sup>2</sup> A briefing conference for the flight to Marrakesh was held at which Moran and others advised that the plane should not fly above 6,000 feet for medical reasons. Tedder decreed that Air Commodore Kelly (Principal Medical Officer of the RAF in North Africa) should accompany Churchill with a portable oxygen kit. Kelly arrived at the White House at midday to instruct the Prime Minister in its use. Kelly later recalled that he found Churchill propped up in bed, surrounded by documents.<sup>9</sup> Following an explanation, Churchill asked Kelly, 'Will you do a trial run on me now?' Kelly complied.<sup>9</sup>

#### Monday 27 December 1943

For the first time since his illness, Churchill dressed in his RAF uniform and Mrs Churchill 'very sweetly fastened the belt for him.'<sup>22</sup> Churchill then inspected a 'magnificent guard of the Coldstream.'<sup>2</sup> As Churchill later recalled, 'I had not realised how much I had been weakened by my illness. I found it quite a difficulty to walk along the ranks and climb into the motor-car.'<sup>2</sup> Moran confirms that, '...it was only very slowly and rather hesitatingly that he passed along the ranks. I was relieved when they helped him into his car.'<sup>3</sup> Churchill was no

doubt cheered, however, by the telegram given to him as he left the White House, reporting that the *Scharnhorst* [German battle-cruiser] had been sunk.

Churchill, Mrs Churchill, Sarah and Moran left Tunis at 8.15 am in the Avro York,<sup>13</sup> with Kelly and the oxygen apparatus in attendance.<sup>4</sup> After breakfasting, Churchill read papers for a while, then rested on his bed.<sup>9</sup> After some three and a half hours of flying below 6,000 feet, the aircraft approached the main Atlas mountains. Due to the poor meteorological conditions, the pilot chose to fly at least 2,000 feet above the highest mountain, an approach commended by Churchill, with which Moran agreed.<sup>3</sup>

As the Avro York climbed to 10,500 feet, Kelly prepared the apparatus and began to give Churchill oxygen.<sup>9</sup> 'I set the oxygen at about 10,000 ft. We climbed gradually. The Prime Minister's colour became perfectly normal, and he went on taking oxygen. When we were at 10,500 ft, I pushed the regulator up higher.'<sup>9</sup> On reaching 12,000 feet, and with Kelly sitting at the end of Churchill's bed, the Avro York entered a cloudless region.

Moran was content when he saw that Churchill was 'quite happy playing with his oxygen apparatus' and fell asleep in his chair.<sup>3</sup> The aircraft then descended slowly to 5,000 feet, whereupon Churchill wanted to discontinue the oxygen, but Kelly advised Churchill to continue it as he was afraid if the oxygen was discontinued suddenly, it might have a bad effect on Churchill's heart.<sup>9</sup> At 1 pm the oxygen was turned off. Ten minutes later, Churchill and Kelly had a very good lunch. 'The PM was in great form,' Kelly recalled later.<sup>9</sup>

The Avro York landed at Marrakesh at 4 pm, by which time Churchill was very tired and went straight to bed.<sup>17</sup> Churchill appeared for dinner, however, and as he left the dining room, put his hand on Kelly's shoulder and said: 'Kelly, you have rendered me a great personal service today, I am very grateful to you.'<sup>9</sup>

Bedford left Tunis with the two nurses at noon.<sup>4</sup> Churchill sent the following telegram to Bedford after arriving in Marrakesh, 'Perfect journey. No ill effects although we flew at 12,000.'<sup>4</sup>

## Discussion

How ill was Churchill? Churchill wrote 'Although Lord Moran records that he judged that the issue was at one time in doubt, I did not share his view. I did not feel so ill in this attack as I had the previous February.'<sup>1</sup> Based on our assessment of both this illness and the one in February 1943, this statement is clinically incorrect. We share Moran's opinion.

The overall mortality from pneumococcal pneumonia in the early 1940s without sulphonamides was 40%, and 10% with antibiotic therapy,<sup>29</sup> though the mortality with treatment in those aged 60–69 (Churchill was 69) was 20%. Furthermore, the pneumonia was complicated by two episodes of atrial

fibrillation, which would increase the morbidity and mortality further. The association between pneumonia and atrial fibrillation has long been recognised. Atrial fibrillation develops overall in some 7% of patients with pneumonia,<sup>30</sup> predominantly in elderly patients.<sup>30</sup>

It is hardly surprising therefore that Moran was 'worried'<sup>16</sup> about Churchill's illness, that he felt 'we were at last right up against things',<sup>3</sup> that he was concerned about the relative lack of medical facilities in Tunis and that he sought specialist opinions from colleagues based in Egypt.

What was the combined expertise of Moran, Bedford, Buttle, Pulvertaft and Scadding? Moran (as Dr Charles Wilson MC) was appointed in 1919 as honorary assistant physician to outpatients at St Mary's Hospital, London, and in the following year was elected Dean of the Medical School at age 38.<sup>31</sup> Moran had become Churchill's doctor on 24 May 1940 and remained his personal physician until Churchill's death in 1965.<sup>31</sup>

Bedford specialised in cardiology and had been appointed to the consultant staff at the Middlesex Hospital in 1926 at the age of 28.<sup>32</sup> Buttle had been employed at the Wellcome Physiological Research Laboratories for 14 years before the outbreak of the Second World War, working first on digitalis and local anaesthesia but then concentrating on antisera and drugs against streptococcal infections.<sup>33</sup> He had published papers on the pharmacology of the sulphanilamide group of drugs.<sup>34</sup> As we have seen, Buttle's expertise was available to Moran for only a limited time as he left for Italy within a few hours.[Pulvertaft RJV. *An Autobiography*, unpublished]

Pulvertaft was appointed director of laboratories at Westminster Hospital in 1931 aged 34.<sup>6,25</sup> In addition, Pulvertaft played the most important role in the Middle East in both producing penicillin and conducting trials on its use.<sup>35</sup> At age 27 Scadding had obtained an appointment at consultant level in an academic department of medicine, with particular responsibility for respiratory disease, at the Hammersmith Hospital (later the Royal Postgraduate Medical School). In 1939 he was appointed physician at the Brompton Hospital.<sup>36</sup> Scadding planned and conducted one of the first double-blind placebo-controlled trials on sulphonamides (in bacillary dysentery<sup>37</sup>) while working as officer-in-charge of the medical division of the 19th British General Hospital (some 3,000 beds).

Thus, Moran had at hand a cardiologist (who could optimise digitalis therapy) and respiratory physician from whom to obtain second opinions, as well as a pathologist to provide laboratory results and who was also an acknowledged expert on the treatment of infections, particularly with penicillin. Buttle and Scadding had extensive clinical experience of sulphonamides.

What of the treatment Churchill received for pneumonia and atrial fibrillation? The 1943 edition of the *National War Formulary*<sup>38</sup> includes only three sulphonamides



(sulphanilamide, sulphapyridine and sulphathiazole) and recommends sulphanilamide as 'the most generally useful'. Fortunately, Churchill was treated with sulphadiazine which, by 1943, was known to be superior to sulphathiazole and sulphapyridine in treating pneumococcal pneumonia.<sup>29</sup>

At this time, systemic treatment with penicillin was rare and it is unlikely it was available in Carthage when sulphadiazine treatment was initiated, as no supplies were provided by Buttle or Pulvertaft. Moreover, the consensus was against giving it to Churchill,<sup>20</sup> as Scadding recalls '...our patient was progressing well on accepted treatment...one does not make therapeutic experiments on the Prime Minister.'<sup>20</sup>

Although we know that digitalis leaf was prescribed, we do not know which of the two most likely preparations available (digitalis folia BP/digitalis USP; digitalis pulverate BP and USP) was given as Moran obtained supplies in Tunis.

Churchill himself claimed later that he did not at any time 'relinquish my part in the direction of affairs, and there was not the slightest delay in giving the decisions which were required from me.'<sup>1</sup> Is there evidence to support this claim?

Despite his illness, Churchill later wrote in his account of the Second World War, 'The doctors tried to keep the work away from my bedside, but I defied them.'<sup>1</sup> Churchill continued to work 'at an alarming pace' from his bed as Churchill's stenographer recalled.<sup>8</sup> Macmillan recorded in his diary on the 14 December 1943 that despite his high temperature, Churchill wrote a long telegram to the Cabinet about the organisation of the command.<sup>16</sup> The evidence suggests strongly that Churchill did work very hard with others on the plans for 'Overlord' (the Allied invasion of German-occupied western Europe). Despite him lying 'prostrate'<sup>1</sup> a substantial number of telegrams were exchanged between those involved.<sup>39</sup>

In conclusion, though Churchill's claim can be accepted that he did not relinquish his part in the direction of affairs, in all probability it is an overstatement given the severity of his illness for Churchill to claim that there was not the slightest delay in giving the decisions which were required and that all were optimal when he had a high fever. **1**

### Acknowledgement

We gratefully acknowledge the advice of Dr Alex Proudfoot.

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