

# Why did 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division Fail? A case-study in command and combat effectiveness

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## ABSTRACT

*Celebrated for its performance in North Africa and Sicily, 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division performed unexpectedly poorly during the Normandy Campaign. It is widely accepted that a principal cause of this decline in combat effectiveness was the division's new commander, Major-General Charles Bullen-Smith, who had replaced the highly popular Douglas Wimberley in late 1943. Using the anomalous performance of the Highland Division as a case-study and focusing on the specific failings of Bullen-Smith, this paper seeks to examine the relationship between command and combat effectiveness.*

## Introduction

The poor performance of the 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division during the Battle of Normandy has been the subject of enduring historical interest.<sup>1</sup> Widely celebrated for its role in the North African and Sicilian Campaigns, the division performed unexpectedly poorly during Operation Overlord. Concerns about 51st Highland Division had been recorded by the end of June 1944; an aborted assault on the Douvres Radar Station on 7 June and the failure of the attack on St Honorine on 22 June were taken as warnings. Lieutenant General John Crocker, Commander I Corps, was a prominent critic. On 24 July 1944, he informed Lieutenant General Crerar, commander of the First Canadian Army, that though the 51<sup>st</sup> Division 'had not been

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<sup>1</sup> For example; David French 'Colonel Blimp and the British Army: British Divisional Commanders in the War against Germany, 1939-45' *English Historical Review* 111 No.444 (November 1996), pp.1182-1201; Terry Copp, 'The 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group in Normandy: towards a new balance sheet' in John Buckley (ed.) *The Normandy Campaign 1944: 60 years on*, (London: Routledge, 2006), pp.11-21; Terry Copp, *Fields of Fire: the Canadians in Normandy*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003); John Buckley, *Monty's Men*, (New Haven: Yale University Press), p.139.

nearly so heavily engaged' as 3<sup>rd</sup> British Division it 'had done badly in several operations it had been called upon to carry out'; the division 'was not, at present, fit for battle'.<sup>2</sup> General Bernard Montgomery had already written to Field Marshal Alan Brooke, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, to communicate his concerns about the Highlanders: 'Regret to report it is the considered opinion of Crocker, Dempsey and myself that 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division is at present not – NOT - battleworthy. It does not fight with determination and has failed at every operation it has been given to do. It cannot fight the Germans successfully'.<sup>3</sup>

51<sup>st</sup> Highland arrived on Juno Beach on 7 June. From late June, the Division was ordered to hold an area known as the Triangle formed by three roads running from Breville, Herouvillete and Troarn.<sup>4</sup> It was described as 'the ghastliest hole of all'<sup>5</sup> because 'anyone sitting in the Triangle or brickworks would be surrounded on three sides'.<sup>6</sup> Conditions here resembled the First World War and the Division was subjected to regular artillery bombardment and counter-attack as they defended their crucial positions: 'The fact must be faced that at this period the normal high morale of the Division fell temporarily to a low ebb. There were many factors responsible for this condition; for example, this was the first occasion in two long years of fighting when the Division had been asked for weeks on end to play a defensive role – and a defensive role in thick woods, far, far different from the open spaces of Africa and Sicily. A kind of claustrophobia affected the troops, and the continual shelling and mortaring from an unseen enemy in relatively great strength was certainly very trying'.<sup>7</sup>

There may have been mitigating circumstances for the Division's loss of morale. Yet, the experiences of the Highland Division were not unique. 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division, for instance, held the position immediately to the north of

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Hart, *Colossal Cracks*. (Mechanisburg PA: Stackpole, 2007), p.29.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Delaforce, *Monty's Highlanders*. (London: Chancellor Press, 2000), p.145.

<sup>4</sup> J.B. Salmond, *The History of the 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division: 1939-45*, (Edinburgh: Pentland Press, 1953), p.147.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p.144.

<sup>6</sup> Alastair Borthwick, *Battalion: British Infantry Unit's Actions from El Alamein to the Elbe, 1942-45, (Where: Who, When)*, p.120.

<sup>7</sup> J. B. Salmond, *The History of the 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division: 1939-45*, (Edinburgh: Pentland Press, 1953), p.144-5.

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51st Highland Division to the east of the Orne River. They suffered significantly higher casualties than 51st Highland in a defensive role, for which they were equally unprepared. Yet, the division suffered no morale problems and its performance was widely praised. 3rd Infantry Division was also involved in intense attritional fighting; its performance was not outstanding but it served adequately despite losing its divisional commander on 15 June and 15, 43 and 50 Divisions also performed well. Indeed, it is noticeable that in comparison with many of these units, the 51st Highland Division's losses were relatively low. By 3 July, 21 Army Group reported the following casualties; 82<sup>nd</sup> (US) Airborne 4587, 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division 3274, 6th Airborne 3258, 3rd Canadian Division 2948, 51st Highland Division 1628.<sup>8</sup> The Highland Division's losses were about half those of other divisions in I Corps.

In addition to the morale problem, the Highland Division also suffered some notable reverses as alluded to by both Crocker and Montgomery. In addition to its failures at Douvres and St Honorine, its attack on the Colombelles factory area on the night of 10-11 July was a fiasco: 'There had already been misfortunes and now there was to be almost disaster, and that was in the tragedy of the attack on Colombelles'.<sup>9</sup> Major Lindsay, second-in-command of 1<sup>st</sup> Gordons, noted after the debacle: 'There is still a lot of talk about morale. The truth is that everybody is rather ashamed of the failure of the Colombelles attack, the first reverse this Brigade has had since anybody can remember'.<sup>10</sup> By July 1944, even the Highlanders were forced to admit that the Division had fallen a long way below its normal standards. This paper attempts to provide some explanation of how a once battle-proven formation failed. In this way, the paper aims to make a small contribution to the literature on combat effectiveness.

### **Command Failure**

51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division constitutes an interesting case study of combat effectiveness because within a few months between the end of 1943 when it left the Mediterranean and June 1944, one of Britain's finest infantry divisions

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<sup>8</sup> The UK National Archive, Kew (TNA), WO 205/644: 5.

<sup>9</sup> J. B. Salmond, *The History of the 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division: 1939-45*, (Edinburgh: Pentland Press, 1953), p.145.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Lindsay, *So Few Got Through: Gordon Highlanders with the 51st Division From Normandy to the Baltic*, (London: Collins, 1946), p.17.

had become one of its worst. There are, of course, numerous potential explanations for the Highland Divisions' loss of combat effectiveness, including training, preparation, deployment and higher command. However, divisional command was plainly a critical factor for 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division. Having performed well in North Africa and Sicily under Major-General Douglas Wimberley, it failed badly in Normandy under his immediate successor, Major-General Charles Bullen-Smith.

Indeed, although Terry Copp has subsequently sought to rehabilitate Bullen-Smith<sup>11</sup>, most other scholars and, even more instructively, Bullen-Smith's contemporaries attributed the failure of the Highlanders in Normandy to him. Bullen-Smith's superiors, for instance, held him exclusively responsible for the ineffectiveness of his division. Lieutenant General John Crocker, claimed 'a new divisional commander, and a new point of view' were required.<sup>12</sup> He recommended Bullen-Smith's removal to General Miles Dempsey, Commander, 2<sup>nd</sup> British Army. Montgomery had already written to Field Marshal Alan Brooke, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, to inform him of his decision: 'I consider the divisional commander is to blame and I am removing him from command. Bullen-Smith has many fine qualities but he has failed to lead Highland Division and I cannot – repeat, cannot – therefore recommend him to command any other division'.<sup>13</sup> Montgomery met with Bullen-Smith on 26 July and relieved him of his command with immediate effect.<sup>14</sup> Of course, neither Crocker nor Montgomery were disinterested observers. It might be argued that Bullen-Smith was blamed, merely so that they could absolve themselves of responsibility for the Division's difficulties.

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<sup>11</sup> Terry Copp, 'The 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group in Normandy' in John Buckley *The Normandy Campaign 1944: 60 years on*, (London: Routledge, 2006), p.28; Terry Copp, *Fields of Fire: the Canadians in Normandy*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp.111-113.

<sup>12</sup> S. Hart, *Montgomery and "Colossal Cracks": the 21st Army Group in Northwest Europe, 1944-45*, (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2000), p.29.

<sup>13</sup> Patrick Delaforce, *Monty's Highlanders – 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division in the Second World War*, (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2000).

pp.141-2.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p.145.

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Decisively, however, Highland officers agreed with Montgomery's assessment of Bullen-Smith's leadership and they were relieved when he was replaced.<sup>15</sup>

The correlation between command and subsequent combat performance is usually pronounced in the case of 51<sup>st</sup> Highland, therefore. Command is conveniently isolated as a causal variable of combat effectiveness in this case. Consequently, by investigating this case of command failure, it may be possible to gain a better understanding of combat effectiveness and its relation to command. It may be possible to indicate more precisely how a commander contributes to or vitiates combat effectiveness. Of course, a single case study, no matter how pertinent, cannot prove a definitive theory about the relationship between command and command effectiveness and no attempt to do so is made here. It is fully recognised that this analysis can be only preliminary and suggestive. However, it may be possible to clarify the connection between command and combat effectiveness.

### **Combat Effectiveness**

Before analysing 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division's performance in Normandy, it is necessary to define combat effectiveness and to try to establish its relationship to command. There is much helpful literature here. For instance, Allan Millett and Williamson Murray define combat effectiveness as 'the ability to destroy the enemy while limiting the damage that he can inflict in return'; Stephen Biddle similarly shows that well-trained troops suffer less casualties and are, therefore, more effective than unskilled forces.<sup>16</sup> For these scholars, combat effectiveness refers to the ability of a force to defeat its enemy in order to achieve its mission; it normally involves inflicting more casualties on an enemy than are incurred.

Although not difficult to define, combat effectiveness is considerably more difficult to explain when innumerable factors contribute to the performance

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<sup>15</sup> Martin Lindsay, *So Few got Through: Gordon Highlanders with the 51st Division From Normandy to the Baltic*, (London: Collins, 1946), p.34.

<sup>16</sup> Allan Millett and Williamson Murray, (eds.) *Military Effectiveness: Volume I, The First World War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.2; Stephen Biddle, 'Explaining Military Outcomes' in Risa Brooks and Elizabeth Stanley (eds.) *Creating Military Power: the sources of military effectiveness*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 217.

of a military force. Thus, in their multi-volume historical survey of combat effectiveness, Alan Millett and Williamson Murray record a great diversity of factors including doctrine, tactical systems, technology, physical environment, 'officership', recruitment, military socialisation, moral and political attitude and troop trainability' which all contribute to combat effectiveness.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Jasen Castillo has illustrated how the political regime and the organizational culture of the armed forces influence battlefield performance.<sup>18</sup> Other scholars variously prioritise political motivation, morale, primary group loyalty, training or discipline as central to combat effectiveness.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, the question of command is normally either implicit or explicit in discussions of combat effectiveness. For instance, Stephen Wesbrook has emphasised that soldiers must be committed to a common mission if they are to fight.<sup>20</sup> Here command becomes critical; the duty of the officer at every level is to ensure that soldiers are oriented to these higher

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<sup>17</sup> Allan Millett and Williamson Murray (eds) *Military Effectiveness, Volume 1, The First World War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p1.

<sup>18</sup> Jasen Castillo, *Endurance and War: the national sources of military cohesion*, (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), p.21.

<sup>19</sup> For example: Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Omer Bartov 'The Conduct of War: Soldiers and the Barbarization of Warfare' *Journal of Modern History*, 64, Supplement (December) 1992, pp.32-45; Morris Janowitz and Edward Shils, 'Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II', *Public Opinion Quarterly* Summer 1948, pp.280-315; Hew Strachan, 'Training, Morale and Modern War', *Journal of Contemporary History* 41(2) (April 2006), pp.211-27; Jonathan Fennell *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign: The Eighth Army and the Path to El Alamein*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Alexander Watson 'Fighting for another fatherland: the Polish minority in the German Army, 1914-18' *English Historical Review* CXXVI No.522 (2011): pp.1137-1166; Alexander Watson *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Anthony King *The Combat Soldier: infantry tactics and cohesion in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries* (Oxford University Press, 2013); 'Discipline and Punish: encouraging combat performance in the citizen and professional army' in Anthony King (ed) *Frontline: Combat and Cohesion in the twenty-first century*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp.93-115.

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Wesbrook, 'The Potential for Military Disintegration' in *Combat Effectiveness and Cohesion*, edited by Sam Sarkesian, (London: Sage, 1980): pp.251-61.

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organizational goals, not just to primary group loyalties. Other scholars have shown precisely how command plays a critical role in combat effectiveness and in the performance of particular units and formations in battle. For instance, in his work on the French *5eme Infanterie Division* in the First World War, Emmanuel Saint-Fuscien has explored the critical role which command played in motivating troops to fight.<sup>21</sup> As the war went on, French officers in this division relied less on discipline and sanctions to compel their soldiers to fight; rather, they inspired and encouraged them by exemplary personal leadership and paternalistic care for them. Of immediate relevance to 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division, John Buckley has sought to show how many of the problems of the British campaign in Normandy were substantially the product of mistakes and misperceptions among commanders about the use of armour.<sup>22</sup> British Commanders were directly responsible for the often poor combat effectiveness of British armoured forces during Overlord by ordering their armoured formations to perform missions for which they were not designed.<sup>23</sup> Recently, Ben Kite has examined the way in which British commanders in Normandy sought to penetrate the fog of war in order to utilise their forces in the most effective way. Each of these studies show how command is immediately relevant to combat effectiveness.<sup>24</sup>

### **Defining Command**

In order to establish how Bullen-Smith failed in his duties as a commander, thereby undermining the combat effectiveness of the division, it is necessary to define command itself. This is not particularly easy. Although there is a wide consensus about command's importance to military performance, there

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<sup>21</sup> Emmanuel Saint-Fuscien *À Vos Ordres? La relations d'autorité é dans l' armée française dans la Grande Guerre*, (Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes etude en Social Science, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> John Buckley, *British Armour in The Normandy Campaign 1944*, (London: Frank Cass, 2004).

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Fennell has analysed morale in the British Army in Normandy and the later European campaign but he has not isolated how command affected morale itself: 'Re-evaluating combat cohesion: the British Second Army in the northwest Europe campaign of the Second World War' in Anthony King (ed) *Frontline: Combat and Cohesion in the twenty-first century*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp.134-166.

<sup>24</sup> Ben Kite *Stout Hearts: the British and Canadians in Normandy 1944*, (Stroud: Helion and Company, 2016), pp.258-89.

is substantial ambiguity about the concept. Command is generally defined as a form of officially recognised decision-making authority. However, there is a great deal of confusion about the relationship between command, leadership and management. For instance, Keith Grint has described this relationship by reference to his ontology of tame, critical and wicked problems.<sup>25</sup> Grint aligns the tame problems of a routine nature with management, critical problems with command and, finally, wicked problems with leadership. Indeed, he has claimed in his work on D-Day, that the German High Command failed because it did not recognise the invasion as a wicked problem, which required leadership. Grint's approach is always interesting but his alignment of command, management and leadership with critical, tame and wicked problems is not always or entirely convincing. Minimally, it does not actually explain the relationship between the three concepts. Accordingly, it is imperative to define the concept of command and to specify its relationship to management and leadership before any coherent analysis can be conducted.

There is a potentially huge literature here, both military and civilian. However, Peter Drucker's work on the executive function is among the most insightful on the question of command, not least because he sees a complete continuity between civilian and military organisations. According to Drucker, an executive, whether civilian or military, has one unique responsibility: 'Decision-making is only one of the tasks of an executive. It usually takes but a small fraction of his time. But to make decisions is the specific executive task'.<sup>26</sup> Of paramount importance here, the executive must answer one fundamental question: 'What is our business?'. The executive must identify the organization's core mission. In addition, the executive must identify 'boundary conditions' of that mission.<sup>27</sup> In defining their mission, executives have also to establish the organizational conditions under which it remains valid and achievable. Drucker's discussion shows that the first and most important duty of a military commander is, like their executive peers in

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<sup>25</sup> Keith Grint *The Arts of Leadership*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Keith Grint *Management and Command: Re-thinking D-Day*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan), p.4.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Drucker, *Management*, (London: Heinemann, 1974), p.71.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Drucker, *The Effective Executive*, (London: Heinemann, 1997), p.108.



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the civilian world, to define the mission and to set the boundary conditions for its achievement.

Some senior military commanders have concurred with Drucker's definition. For instance, in his notes to the 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group, written in November 1944, aimed especially at his divisional commanders, General Bernard Montgomery prioritised mission-definition as the primary responsibility of the commander: 'A war is won by victories in battle. No victories will be gained unless commanders sort out clearly in their own minds those essentials which are vital for success and will ensure that those things form the framework on which all action is based'.<sup>28</sup> It was precisely because mission definition was so fundamental to command that Montgomery insisted that only a commander could make a plan; never the staff. Montgomery's language is naturally quite different to Drucker's prose. Yet, the concept is plainly commensurate. Like Drucker, Montgomery insisted that commanders identified the mission and the boundary conditions, in which that mission could be completed.

Mission definition is the prime executive decision of the military commander, then, but it presumes the mundane under-labour of management. Drucker notes that while 'thinking through the boundary conditions is the most difficult step in decision making, converting decision into effective action...is usually the most time consuming'.<sup>29</sup> Commanders must manage, administer and direct their human and material resources in order that any mission can be fulfilled. In a force of any size, this is challenging. At the divisional level, for instance, commanders must coordinate some 20,000 personnel, hundreds of vehicles and weapons in typically difficult geographic and climactic conditions, facing an opponent actively seeking to disrupt and destroy their force. Even the simplest mission necessarily involves a multiplicity of administrative sub-decisions about how that mission is to be achieved in practice. A single oversight about an apparently trivial task might have catastrophic repercussions.

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<sup>28</sup> Australian War Memorial Library, abn89020242, Bernard Montgomery, 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group: Some Notes on the conduct of War and the Infantry Division in Battle Belgium, November 1944), p.5.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid p.114.

Management of the mission accordingly includes a bewildering range of activities. However, management involves several distinct administrative requirements. Any military mission necessarily involves a series of tasks which have to be completed if the mission is to be accomplished. Accordingly, once the mission has been established, the constituent tasks need to be identified; these tasks need to be prioritised in order of importance; they have to be assigned to particular sub-units and sequenced. A detailed plan will be required which defines, prioritises, assigns and sequences all of these tasks. Finally, the commander has to supervise the tasks in real time in the light of inevitable alterations due to internal organizational frictions and situational changes.

There is a third inalienable dimension to command. However good the plan, if soldiers are not motivated to fight, the mission will fail. Indeed, on the battlefield, leadership assumes a priority which it does not have in civilian life. In the face of the dangers and terrors of combat, commanders must motivate their troops to fight. The leadership function is critical because it is the basis of morale.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, so salient is the leadership function that much of the literature on military command ultimately collapses into the contemplation of leadership. The cognitive and managerial dimensions of command, which are so critical to it, are submerged to the point of invisibility in celebrations not only of leadership but of great individual leaders, from Alexander to Patton.<sup>31</sup> This mistake is understandable given the importance of leadership in a military context. Yet, it is important to recognise that, command always consists of three elements: mission definition, mission management and mission motivation.

When command is understood in this way, its connection to combat effectiveness begins to become clear. Although commanders are invested with the authority to give orders, which must be obeyed, it is incorrect to identify coercion as the defining characteristic of command. Authority is

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<sup>30</sup> Peter Drucker *Managing for the Future*, (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann 1992), pp.100-1.

<sup>31</sup> For example: Edgar Puryear, *19 Stars: A study in military character and leadership*, (Novato, CA: Prisdio, 1981); Edgar Puryear *American Generalship: character is everything*, *Air & Space Power Journal*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2009); Harry Laver and Jeffrey Matthews *The Art of Command: military leadership from George Washington to Colin Powell*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2010).

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given to commanders only insofar as the role serves a decisive organisational function. This function is not primarily disciplinary, enforcing conformity; it facilitates coordination and cooperation. In this way, command is an institutional solution to an organizational problem; it generates cohesion in a formation. Specifically, by uniting decision-making authority in one person and one role, a large military force is able to unite subordinate units, whose troops are not co-present with each other and who, in most cases, do not know each other. Crucially, the combat effectiveness of a formation, as a formation, is substantially dependent upon the ability of its commander to synchronise its disparate efforts in order to generate collective effects. Skilful command has a galvanising influence on a military force; by orchestrating the activities of subordinate units and motivating troops, command is able to create a level of combat power, which supervenes the capabilities of each of the parts. A well-commanded force has properties, which exceed those of its constituent units, fighting alone. On this definition, command and combat effectiveness are immediately connected. Command fuses a formation together and increases its determination to fulfil its missions.

The rest of the paper will apply this concept of command and its relationship to combat effectiveness in order to analyse the performance of Bullen-Smith and the 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division. The discussion begins with an analysis of Bullen-Smith's leadership. This does not imply that leadership was more important than mission definition or management to the 51<sup>st</sup> Highland in Normandy. Rather, the analysis of Bullen-Smith's leadership facilitates a wider assessment of the performance of the Division in comparison with North Africa and the Mediterranean, before going into Bullen-Smith's specific failures in Normandy.

### **Bullen-Smith's Leadership**

In his notes to 21 Army Group in November 1944, Montgomery highlighted the importance of morale and, therefore, leadership to success in battle. He described morale 'as probably the most important single factor in war'.<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, for Montgomery, if troops were to be motivated a divisional commander 'must have certain personal qualities'; 'his first task is to create an atmosphere'.<sup>33</sup> A commander has to create an esprit de corps in which his

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<sup>32</sup> Montgomery, *Some Notes*, p.6.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p.13.

troops were inspired by a sense of corporate loyalty. Having commanded citizen soldiers in the First and Second World Wars, Montgomery was deeply aware of the importance of morale to combat effectiveness and morale's potential fragility. Indeed, Michael Howard has similarly noted that the difficulty of maintaining morale in a conscript army whose troops might be reluctant warriors: 'if they [conscripts] come from complex, urban and rather unmilitary societies such as the United States and the United Kingdom, they will require very careful handling indeed'.<sup>34</sup>

In fact, it was especially difficult for Bullen-Smith to create this atmosphere. One of the problems, with which the 51 Highland Division had to contend in Normandy, was the reputation that it had earned in North Africa and the Mediterranean. There it had consistently performed well and, indeed, precisely because of its performance in Montgomery's 8<sup>th</sup> Army, a sense of entitlement and indeed resentment began to emerge in the Division that it was unreasonably being asked to fight again: 'A great many of the officers and men were war-weary by the time they got home and unfortunately there was no large-scale system of relief; in fact, very few left the Division, and it was owing to this that they made a very poor showing in Normandy'.<sup>35</sup> General Horrocks similarly noted that: 'They begin to feel it is time they had a rest and someone else did the fighting'.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, this does not absolve Bullen-Smith. In stark contrast, 82<sup>nd</sup> (US) Airborne Division, commanded by the redoubtable Matt Ridgway, found no difficulty in motivating itself for Overlord, even though they had already fought in North Africa, Sicily and Italy and would take among the heaviest casualties of any division in Normandy.

Undoubtedly the Highland Division was tired. In addition, the very success of Bullen-Smith's predecessor, Douglas Wimberley, exacerbated Bullen-Smith's leadership problem. Wimberley was a skilled and admired leader, affectionately called 'Tartan or Long Tam' by his soldiers, he understood that

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<sup>34</sup> Michael Howard 'Leadership in the British Army in the Second World War: some personal observations' in Gary Sheffield *Leadership and Command: the Anglo-American Military Experience since 1861*, (London: Brassey's, 2002).

<sup>35</sup> Major General Verney cited in Carlo D'Este, *Decision in Normandy*, (London: Pan, 1983), p.272.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 277; Max Hastings, *Overlord*, (London: Macmillan, 1984), p.57.

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motivating troops required their identification with the unit, the Division and with Wimberley himself, as the divisional commander. In order to engender this sense of collective identity and pride, Wimberley developed three leadership techniques.

Firstly, he emphasised the distinctive ethnicity of the Highland Division; he himself had been commissioned into the Camerons in 1915 and he insisted on recruiting only Scottish soldiers. Indeed, even after 7000 casualties in the Mediterranean theatre, 81 per cent of officers and 72 per cent of other ranks were Scotsmen.<sup>37</sup> Even soldiers who were not Scottish were accorded a pseudo-ethnic status; Wimberley 'made every single one of them believe he was a Highlander, whatever else his birth certificate said to the contrary'.<sup>38</sup> To this end, he insisted that all troops wear their regimental tartan dress whenever possible and he was enthusiastic about unit and divisional signposts which he wanted prominently displayed. The famous 'HD' symbol of the division was painted almost ubiquitously on vehicles and buildings.<sup>39</sup> He attached this divisional pride to a sense of political and national purpose and claimed that 'the inherent belief in a worthy cause...made hate [of the Germans often encouraged by other commanders] unnecessary'.<sup>40</sup> The Scottish ethno-national identity which Wimberley deliberately cultivated in the Division was, at least, partly the 'invented tradition'<sup>41</sup> of an 'imagined community'<sup>42</sup>. Nevertheless, it was deeply effective in motivating his troops.

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<sup>37</sup> J. B. Salmond, *The History of the 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division: 1939-45*, (Edinburgh: Pentland Press, 1953), p.132.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p.116.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p.20, p.22.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p.23. Highlighting the importance of ethnicity to the division, the racist element of Wimberley's identity politics needs to be noted here. His memoirs include several passages in which Wimberley reveals that he did not want Africans or Jews in the Division: 'On another day I came across a big South African "buck" Nigger wearing Balmoral Bonnet with a red hackle up. I was so angry...I removed it and threw it away. I was having no black Africans in the Highland Regiment', Douglas Wimberley *The Memoirs of Major-General Wimberley Volumes I and II*, Imperial War Museum (IWM) PP/MCR/182, p.35.

<sup>41</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>42</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (London: Verso, 2016).

Secondly, Wimberley was careful to be seen frequently by his soldiers so that each one 'felt he had a personal acquaintance with the General'<sup>43</sup>; he was not an HQ general but was constantly driving around in his jeep. As one officer in the Division noted; 'The Jocks fare better if it is under somebody they know'.<sup>44</sup>

Thirdly, Wimberley was able to generate a strong corporate identity in the Highland Division. He identified the events (i.e. entertainment) unit of the Division, the 'Balmorals', to be a critical element in his project for generating a Divisional identity: 'You can be a unifying force...I want you to build up an esprit de corps'.<sup>45</sup> Even in their leisure, troops were taught to identify with the division and, indeed, with the divisional commander, who had ordered them to take place.

But Wimberley's very success caused Bullen-Smith major problems.

Charles Bullen-Smith replaced Wimberley in August 1943 when the division returned from the Mediterranean. This appointment was met with dismay: 'No understandable reason was given. The Jocks reacted with amazement that their 'Tartan Tam' was leaving: the man they knew, the man they trusted...When he came to say farewells to the Bn [5<sup>th</sup> Battalion Black Watch], tough battle veterans had real tears in their eyes'.<sup>46</sup> The soldiers were de-moralized by the loss of a proven commander; it would take an exceptional replacement to make good that loss.

As an Englishman Bullen-Smith faced another problem; Wimberley had created a distinctive Highland ethos within the Division but, as an Englishman, Bullen-Smith was neither a Highlander by birth nor was he seen to have earned acceptance from prior service with the Division although he had commanded the 15<sup>th</sup> Scottish (Lowland) Division. Furthermore, Bullen-Smith

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<sup>43</sup> J. B. Salmond *The History of the 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division: 1939-45*, (Edinburgh: Pentland Press, 1953), p.21.

<sup>44</sup> Martin Lindsay, *So Few got Through: Gordon Highlanders with the 51st Division From Normandy to the Baltic*, (London: Collins, 1946), p.18.

<sup>45</sup> J. B. Salmond *The History of the 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division: 1939-45*, (Edinburgh: Pentland Press, 1953), p.23.

<sup>46</sup> Delaforce, *Monty's Highlanders*, 116; also J. B. Salmond, *The History of the 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division: 1939-45*, (Edinburgh: Pentland Press, 1953), p.132.

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had yet to command any unit in combat in the Second World War; although he had served as Montgomery's GSO1 in 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division during the 1940 Battle of France and where he came to Montgomery's attention.

Given his biography, and the Division's Highland ethos Bullen-Smith could not exploit the common ethnicity, which had been invoked by Wimberley. Bullen-Smith had tried to generate a sense of Divisional pride before D-Day by exhorting them to uphold the traditions of the Division and he was careful to share any congratulations from his superiors to the Division's units. Thus, he forwarded the good wishes sent to him by Montgomery on 21 June (along with a gift of 90,000 cigarettes) and repeatedly praised his brigades for their performance. Yet, he was still incapable of inspiring the affection and loyalty earned by Wimberley. It was very noticeable that Bullen-Smith's dismissal was not mentioned in any of the War Diaries, either for 51st Highland Division, or for any of its subordinate Brigades and Battalions.<sup>47</sup> By contrast, the arrival of his replacement was greeted with pointed enthusiasm: 'The new divisional commander has arrived: Major General Tom Rennie. He is Black Watch who escaped in 1940 when the Division had to capitulate at St Valery and subsequently commanded a battalion and then a brigade in the reformed Highland Division in North Africa. Everybody is delighted with the appointment'.<sup>48</sup> Another officer in 5 Black Watch reaffirmed the point, usefully highlighting the importance of the Highland connection: 'To the Battalion it [Rennie's appointment] was especially welcome; he was their CO who had taught them so much; had led them into their first battle at Alamein; had then commanded 154 Brigade with distinction and, more recently, had taken the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division into the D-Day landings to secure its final objectives. Rennie was "one of their own" and was seen as the real successor to General Wimberley. The effect on Divisional morale was immediate and lasting and the 5 Black Watch (?) noted with pride that they were one of the first units to receive a visit from Rennie'.<sup>49</sup> For this battalion, Bullen-Smith was an aberration that was rectified by the appointment of Rennie when, and crucially Bullen-Smith had never been considered as *one of their own*. The

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<sup>47</sup> TNA, WO 171/1266, 5 Black Watch, War Diary, 25 July 1944.

<sup>48</sup> Martin Lindsay, *So Few got Through: Gordon Highlanders with the 51st Division From Normandy to the Baltic*, (London: Collins, 1946), p.32.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Doherty, *British Armoured Divisions and their Commanders, 1939-1945*, (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2006), p.167.

ethnic identity, which Wimberley had actively promoted, had critically undermined Bullen-Smith's attempts to lead the Division and the strength of this unit identity can be seen in the behaviour of those Division members that took place in the September 1943 mutiny, just nine months earlier.

### **Operation STACK**

So, Bullen-Smith had failed as a leader and he neither gained their acceptance or motivated the Division's men to fight well in Normandy. However, as Drucker noted, a commander's first role is to define the mission and, then, to organize and coordinate its execution. In order to assess Bullen-Smith's command and management of the Division, this paper will not attempt to analyse every action in which the Division was engaged from 7 June, when it landed on Sword Beach, to 26 July, when Bullen-Smith was sacked; it will focus primarily on an operation to raid the Colombelles factory area on 10-11 July 1944. For both Bullen-Smith's superiors and members of the Division itself, the Colombelles operation was a decisive event and was the immediate cause of Bullen-Smith's sacking. The Colombelles operation provides the best evidence of Bullen-Smith's failings and it is, therefore, particularly apposite to focus this study of command and combat effectiveness on that operation. Indeed, precisely because it was so controversial at the time, there is extensive archival evidence available. Consequently, this operation can be used to illustrate the failures of Bullen-Smith's mission definition and mission management.

The Colombelles factory area was located two miles to the north east of Caen on the east bank of the Orne River. It was on the right flank of the Division's defensive position and it represented an important tactical position since it acted as hinge to the open plain to the east which ran down to Cagny and the Bourguebus Ridge to the south. The factories at Colombelles were of particular concern to the Allies since their chimneys were in use by the Germans to observe Allied movements and to call in artillery fire.<sup>50</sup> A number of attempts had been made to destroy the chimneys by airstrikes, naval gunfire and artillery fire but to no effect.<sup>51</sup> Consequently, in early July,

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<sup>50</sup> TNA, WO 171/527, Major General Charles Bullen-Smith, GOC 51 Highland Division, letter to HQ I Corps, 14 June 1944.

<sup>51</sup> TNA, WO 171/263, Royal Artillery, I Corps, War Diary, 10 July 1944.



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the Division attacked the factory area with the objective of destroying the chimneys.

It is worth describing the origins and execution of this operation in detail. On 7 July, at an O Group with his brigade commanders, Bullen-Smith reported that a 'big frontal attack would be put in on Caen early on 8 July [Operation CHARNWOOD]' which the Division would support with artillery: 'The question was whether 51 Division could take advantage of this attack west of the River Orne to push South itself. The GOC considered, however, that he could only advance South at the expense of weakening dangerously the firm base holding the Orne bridgehead and decided that the most that could be done initially at any rate was a raid by 153 Brigade into the Factory Area 0769'.<sup>52</sup> Accordingly, on 8 July the CO of 5 Black Watch attended a conference at 153 Brigade Headquarters where the operation was discussed: 'an attack against Colombelles might have to be undertaken in the near future'.<sup>53</sup> That night (8/9 July), following an order at 2130, A and B Companies I Gordons 153 Brigade mounted a raid on the factory area, taking three prisoners, which seem to have confirmed that the operation would go ahead.<sup>54</sup> The following day, 9 July at 1000, the CO of 5 Black Watch held his own conference with his gunners and tank commanders 'in anticipation of an attack on Colombelles factory' and in the evening he received warning for the coming battle.<sup>55</sup>

51 Division issued their final order for the assault on 10 July: Op Order No.3. Operation STACK. The plan ordered 153 Brigade (5 Black Watch and 5/7 Gordons with 7 Black Watch attached from 154 Brigade) with support from 11 Sherman tanks from 148 Regiment Royal Armoured Corps and 17-pounder anti-tank guns from I Corps to assault Colombelles; '51 (H) Div secure and hold Colombelles 0770-085701 with a view to sending one battalion into Factory Area 0769 for sufficient time to enable Div RE parties to destroy Factory chimneys and thereafter dominate Factory area with

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<sup>52</sup> TNA, WO 171/680, 154 Brigade, War Diary, 7 July 1944.

<sup>53</sup> TNA, Incomplete Reference, Lieutenant Colonel Thomson 'On action at Colombelles on 10/11 July', Report, 23 July 1944, War Diary 5 Black Watch.

<sup>54</sup> TNA, WO 171/680, 154 Brigade, War Diary, 9 July 1944.

<sup>55</sup> TNA, WO 171/1266, 5 Black Watch, War Diary, 9 July 1944,.

fighting patrols'.<sup>56</sup> The operation was divided into three phases; Phase I involved the occupation of Colombelles village, the Chateau and the Cross-roads to the north of the factories by 1 Gordons and 5 Black Watch respectively. This would provide a secure base for the assault of the factory area itself. In Phase II, 7 Black Watch were 'to seize covering posn in factory (?) area (?) to enable RE demolition parties to destroy chimneys'.<sup>57</sup> Finally, Phase III involved the 'withdrawal of 7 BW and RE demolition parties from Factory Area'.<sup>58</sup> Two O Groups were held on 10 July 'which were attended by commanders of supporting arms. All details for the attack and subsequent consolidation by objective tied up and agreed upon to the satisfaction of all commanders'.<sup>59</sup>

In the event, and after a successful start, things did not go to plan. 5 Black Watch left Bas de Ranville at 2315 and arrived at their start line at 2345. By 0300, they had secured the cross-roads at 084701 with anti-tank guns and the 11 Sherman tanks supporting them. Meanwhile, however, 1 Gordons were struggling to secure the village and Chateau; their initial attempts were driven off, leaving the Black Watch's right flank exposed. Indeed, later on the Black Watch could not be sure whether the fire they were receiving from that flank was from the Gordons or the enemy. Things started to go badly wrong as dawn began to break at 0400. At this point, the Black Watch were subjected to intense artillery fire; 63 shells landed near the HQ in three minutes. By 0630, they were being attacked by five enemy tanks and an 88mm anti-tank gun from their rear. At this point, the 'CO gave orders for the Shermans to engage Boche tanks which they did right nobly but their shells failed to make any impression on the Boche and within no time at all, 10 of the Shermans had been knocked out. For some, unknown reasons, the Corps 17 pounder anti-tank guns failed to give us any support otherwise there might have been a very different picture'; in fact, the Division's gunners had ran away. At this point, the Black Watch were overlooked from three sides and by 0700 'several of the Sherman brewed up'; at 0745 'all the tanks

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<sup>56</sup> TNA, WO 171/525, 51 Highland Division, War Diary, Op Order No. 3.

<sup>57</sup> TNA, WO 171/528, 51 Highland Division, War Diary 51, Op Order No. 3, Op Order No. 3, Operation 'STACK', 10 July 1944.

<sup>58</sup> TNA, WO 171/528, Highland Division, War Diary 51, Op Order No. 3, Operation 'STACK', 10 July 1944.

<sup>59</sup> TNA, WO 171: 1266, Lieutenant Colonel Thomson 'On action at Colombelles on 10/11 July', Report, 23 July 1944, War Diary 5 Black Watch.

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but one were knocked out'. 'By 0800 hours, the position had become utterly untenable and the CO [with the agreement of 153 Brigade commander] gave the order to withdraw'.<sup>60</sup> I Gordons had achieved even less; they were subjected to intense machine gun and artillery fire from the start which repulsed their initial assault and wounded their CO at 0520.<sup>61</sup> They withdrew without ever securing the chateau. By 0930, the operation was over and 153 Brigade had withdrawn; 7 Black Watch and the Royal Engineer demolition teams were never called forward. The operation was a complete failure, resulting in significant casualties; the Black Watch had 128 killed and wounded and all the anti-tank guns and 10 Sherman tanks were lost, for no gain at all.

### **Command: Defining the Colombelles Mission**

Given its abject failure, it is worth considering in detail how Bullen-Smith conceived such a catastrophic mission in the first place. Although they ostensibly expressed their satisfaction before the operation, there was, in fact, deep scepticism among Bullen-Smith's subordinates. For example, Lieutenant Colonel Thomson, CO 5 Black Watch, who would also be sacked on 26 July, explained why the operation was not feasible from the outset: 'even a cursory examination of the factory made it clear that hundreds of vantage points other than the chimneys afforded almost as good observation'.<sup>62</sup> Even if it had been successful, the operation to destroy the chimneys would have failed as an overall objective since the Germans would still have retained elevated observation posts in the area. In order to deny the enemy, the factory area had to be seized and held permanently. Thomson also noted the tactical impracticality of the operation. Even if the cross-roads were secured so that the demolition team could advance, 'a Battalion lying underneath the observation of the factory would be very precarious unless the factory should be captured at and held as part of the same operation. The plan did not include the holding of the factory area but merely the destruction of the chimneys and consequently, in my opinion, was unsound and should never have been put into operation'.<sup>63</sup> Thomson made his views 'known (to) my Brigadier before the action' though he 'hid his views from

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<sup>60</sup> TNA, WO 171/1266, 5 Black Watch, War Diary, 11 July.

<sup>61</sup> TNA, WO 171/678, 153 Brigade, War Diary, 11 July.

<sup>62</sup> TNA, WO 171: 1266, LTC Thomson 'On action at Colombelles on 10/11 July'.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

subordinates'.<sup>64</sup> The decision to mount the raid demonstrated an egregious lack of military judgement; the mission was unfeasible.

The attack was also based on an optimistic British appreciation of the enemy defences: 'The operation was based on the assumption that the general area of the factory, Colombelles and the cross-roads were thinly held. I doubted this because my own patrols had generally reported the contrary and all my observations from St Honorine had drawn me to the opposite conclusion'.<sup>65</sup> In a letter, he wrote to the Commanding Officer of 5 Black Watch, Brigadier Hamish Murray, commander of 153 Brigade, revealed his deep misgivings about the operation: 'I want to record my opinion relating to the action of 5 Black Watch on the occasion of the attack against the northern edge of the factory at Colombelles on 11 Jul 44. I am satisfied that the Battalion plan of attack was sound, that it was successfully executed, and that the disposition of troops on the objective were as good as the ground permitted. In the face of counter-attack which saw the liquidation of the tank force under your command and the neutralization of the anti-tank guns, I am quite certain that any attempt to hold on to the position would have led to the systematic destruction of the battalion...Nothing happened in this action which was discreditable to either the Battalion or the Regiment'. Significantly, however, Murray criticized the concept of the operation - roundly: 'I am at fault in that I agreed to carry out an operation which was fundamentally unsound'. He concluded: 'My own regret is that the operation should have ever been considered necessary'.<sup>66</sup> For Murray, the factory area was held too strongly for the mission to succeed and in his view 153 Brigade lacked the combat power needed to ensure success.

It is remarkable that Bullen-Smith could have thought there would only be light opposition. A single POW, deemed unreliable by Divisional intelligence, claimed the area was held by only a company of German troops but this was extremely unlikely. The Colombelles factory area had been identified early in the analysis of the Normandy campaign to be tactically significant. If the Germans were gaining significant tactical advantage from the chimneys as observation posts, a reasonable deduction would be that they would defend

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> TNA, WO 171/1266, 5 Black Watch, War Diary, 16 July 1944,.

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them resolutely. Moreover, as Thomson suggests, 51 Highland Division's own fighting patrols suggested it was heavily held. For instance, following the raid by I Gordons on the night of 8/9 July, the Battalion HQ was subjected to intense mortar fire as the patrol withdrew. This suggested that there was a significant enemy force in the factory area and that 21 Panzer Division, which was responsible for this sector, was determined to hold it. Indeed, it subsequently required two Canadian brigades to clear Colombelles during Operation Totalise. Major Lindsay of I Gordons later confirmed the point when he visited Colombelles: 'The Canadians captured Colombelles yesterday and I have just come back from viewing the scene of our abortive attack on July 13 [sic]. I can't think how anybody could have expected a battalion to take such a strong position with no fire support... All houses were fortified and the ground honeycombed with German diggings'.<sup>67</sup> In fact, Bullen-Smith had employed a brigade but, against so formidable objective, this was clearly inadequate.

Bullen-Smith failed to define and resource the mission correctly. He not only failed to define the objective as denying the enemy an observation advantage by taking and holding the factory area he further failed by assigning only a brigade when a full divisional assault was necessary. It is possible to infer why he came to such a conclusion. As he stressed before Operation STACK, the primary mission of the Division was to secure the eastern flank of the Normandy bridgehead and, consequently, he could not assign his whole division to the Colombelles operation. Indeed, the reason why 7 Black Watch was attached to 153 Brigade seems to have been that 5/7 Gordons were committed to holding the line in the 153 Brigade area while the operation was carried out. Bullen-Smith may have been constrained by the force he could deploy but any serious appreciation of Colombelles would have indicated that a major divisional scale operation was necessary to dislodge German troops in the area so as to seize and then hold the factories. Because his primary mission was the defence of the Triangle he had inadequate forces available to take Colombelles so Bullen-Smith should either have abandoned the operation or negotiated with I Corps and General Crocker for the relief of at least a second of the Division's brigades from the line or the attachment of a brigade of troops from another division. Sadly,

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<sup>67</sup> Martin Lindsay, *So Few got Through: Gordon Highlanders with the 51st Division From Normandy to the Baltic*, (London: Collins, 1946), p.23.

there is no evidence that Bullen-Smith pursued either action and resulted in his mission definition being profoundly flawed. Critically, the operation as carried out could never have fulfilled its primary objective of denying the Germans' their observation posts. In the unlikely event that the engineers had been able to destroy the chimneys, the Germans would still have enjoyed many other elevated observation positions in the factory area.

### **Managing the Colombelles Mission**

At Colombelles, Bullen-Smith had defined an unachievable mission and had failed in his principal responsibility as a Divisional commander. However, once he had defined this deeply flawed mission, his management of it was also proven to have been flawed. His identification, prioritisation and assignment of the tasks were severely underdeveloped and he almost entirely failed to supervise their execution. A comparison with Wimberley is useful. In industrial warfare in which firepower dominates the battlefield, success relies on the coordination of assaulting forces and firepower in order to overwhelm the enemy; combat effectiveness at the higher level is dependent upon this careful coordination of resources. This is a technical, managerial matter, which requires analysis, planning and constant direction as the battle is engaged. Wimberley was meticulous in his battle preparation and insisted that all soldiers be fully apprised of the operational situation because Wimberley believed that ignorance stimulated unnecessary and dangerous fears. At El Alamein a soldier asked him: 'Could you tell us what is happening, sir?'.<sup>68</sup> Situational awareness did not only reduce anxiety; it was essential for coordination between units. Before attacks, Wimberley ordered all Battalion Commanders to make their own scale model of the operations and then explain it to every man so they understood their role.<sup>69</sup> Before El Alamein, for instance, the Division constructed detailed models and rehearsed the operation on dummy positions.<sup>70</sup> Careful preparation was critical to success. It is noticeable that when Wimberley did not use these methods and when he had under-estimated the Germans, as he did at Gerbini at the Dittaino River on 20-21 July 1943 during the Sicilian Campaign, there was a major

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<sup>68</sup> J. B. Salmond, *The History of the 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division: 1939-45*, (Edinburgh: Pentland Press, 1953), p.21.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, p.22.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, pp.31-2.

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setback; his division was repulsed and, for the first time, under his command 'ended up on our original start-line'.<sup>71</sup>

In contrast to the standards that Wimberley had established in the Highland Division, Bullen-Smith's battle preparation before the Colombelles operation was seriously deficient. As described above, Operation STACK was a hasty, even hurried, operation based on inadequate intelligence, not only of the enemy, but of the ground itself. The decision to mount the attack was taken on 8 July but orders, that had been developed for a single raid on the night of 8/9 July, were issued on 10 July and for an attack that night. Consequently, although 'the lack of briefing was not a contributing factor to the failure of the operation', according to Thomson, he admitted that 'it was not possible to brief all ranks as thoroughly as had been customary in the past'.<sup>72</sup> Martin Lindsay was more critical: 'it appears that every text-book rule was broken; a night attack without any previous recce, only 24 hours to prepare for it and men attacking straight out of their front line trenches instead of from a reserve position'.<sup>73</sup>

According to Montgomery, battalions and brigades were to be given specific tasks and clear-cut objectives.<sup>74</sup> However, as a result of the hurried preparation, there was insufficient detail about the specific tasks which the units were to conduct. Captain Lionel Aitkenhead who was a 'Q' (logistics) staff officer in the HQ denied that the tasks had been analysed in sufficient detail: 'In retrospect, it seemed that the factory would really have needed a Corps to take it. The feeling was that in order to obtain results, orders to the Division had not simply to be carried out, but analysed as to whether the tasks were within the capability of the Division and the timescale allotted'.<sup>75</sup> The result of this deficiency was that mission itself was misconceived. Other commentators also highlighted the lack of detailed preparation in identifying and assigning tasks. In the Royal Engineers' report following the operation, the officer commanding one of the field companies assigned to the

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<sup>71</sup> IWM, PP/MCR/182, Wimberley, *The Memoirs of Major-General Wimberley*, p.178.

<sup>72</sup> Martin Lindsay, *So Few got Through: Gordon Highlanders with the 51st Division From Normandy to the Baltic*, (London: Collins, 1946), p.23.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, p.17.

<sup>74</sup> 21 Army Group 'Some Notes on the Conduct of War', 17 Incomplete Reference

<sup>75</sup> Delaforce *Monty's Highlanders* p.145.

demolition work complained about the lack of detailed intelligence on the factories; 'It is emphasised that, from the engineer point-of-view, it would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, to have carried out this operation without air photographs. Actually, only one set of air photographs per company was available, and it was felt this is quite insufficient and that air cover on the basis of at least 4 per company is the minimum required'.<sup>76</sup> The Division did not have sufficient intelligence on the target for the Division or the sub-units to develop a coherent plan with all the precise tasks specified. Phase II was extremely vague on how 7 Black Watch were to secure the area and how precisely the Royal Engineers were to do their work. Even though this was the most complex and dangerous element of the campaign, their actual tasks were only ever implied. At the same time, in a notable breach of doctrine, Bullen-Smith had no reserve for the operation. Essentially, if anything went wrong, he could not alter the plan. As can be seen Bullen-Smith had fail to identify, failed to prioritise and had failed to assign the tasks with sufficient care.

But, there are numerous cases where military plans have not been adequately detailed and yet the mission has been successfully accomplished. In many cases, firepower and, especially, the artillery can often redeem potentially flawed manoeuvres; hence commanders concentrate on the artillery fireplan and the tasks of the gunners but Bullen-Smith had also assigned too little artillery support to the operation. Since artillery is critical on the industrial battlefield, the Divisional fireplan was fundamental to success. Indeed, in his 21 Army Group noted, Montgomery prioritised artillery, combined arms cooperation and the 'concentration of great force at the selected place'. In particular, in order to maximise the effect of artillery, Montgomery stressed that it was necessary to 'keep fire-power concentrated and under central control' and to 'hit hard on a narrow front'.<sup>77</sup> Bullen-Smith was unlucky that the anti-tank gunners attached from I Corps deserted their positions when the German tanks engaged them and the attached Sherman tanks were eliminated all but immediately. However, some of these problems might have been avoided or at least mitigated had more artillery been assigned to the

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<sup>76</sup> TNA, WO 171/532. Captain RE, OC 276 Field Company, Royal Engineers, Headquarters Royal Engineers 51 Highland Division, 'Brief Engineer Report on Abortive Op "STACK"', War Diary, 1-31 July 1944.

<sup>77</sup> Montgomery, *Some Notes*, p.7 & p.17.



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assault. Bullen-Smith does not seem to have organised anything like sufficient fire-support for an operation of this type. In particular, he did not request any additional support from I Corps: '51 (H) INF DIV issued their own fire plan for OP STACK'.<sup>78</sup> And, Lieutenant Colonel Thomson recorded some concern about the artillery support: 'it is sufficient to say that very considerable RA support came down on the objective at Zero as planned. *The volume of fire did not approach what we had been led to expect from the number of Regiments employed but the fire was accurate and effective*'.<sup>79</sup> Although Thomson later recorded heavy defensive fire, the artillery support was insufficient to stop the counter-attack by German tanks or to mount counter-battery strikes against German mortars, rockets and artillery pieces.

Significantly, although Operation STACK was a manifestly important and difficult operation for 51 Highland Division and for Bullen-Smith, personally, he was not present at or near to Colombelles on the night of 10/11 July. The records do not report his location, though it is presumed he stayed in his main Headquarters as he received notification of its progress by radio. He exerted no direct influence on the battle at Colombelles so he failed to supervise the action. He left the fight entirely to his subordinates, apparently confirming the reports which he was receiving from 153 Brigade, and finally agreeing to the withdrawal over the radio. It was an unfortunate decision, especially since there was no infantry or armoured reserve, nor was any additional artillery or armour support available for deployment that would have justified him staying at his headquarters. Consequently, Bullen-Smith had no means of influencing the course of events should the unexpected transpire. When the I Gordons failed to seize the Chateau in order to secure the right flank of the assault, he had no means of rectifying the situation. Of course, given the poverty of the plan and the inadequate preparation for the mission, it is likely that the operation would have failed even if he had been present. Yet, he was unable to oversee his subordinates, encourage the troops involved or reinforce the attack as it failed. It was noticeable that Lieutenant Colonel Thomson regarded the flight of the anti-tank gunners as a critical moment in the fight. At that point, the Shermans and his own soldiers were vulnerable to the superiority of the German tanks. Perhaps the presence of Bullen-Smith in Colombelles might have impressed

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<sup>78</sup> TNA, WO 171/263, Royal Artillery, I Corps, War Diary, 10 July.

<sup>79</sup> TNA, WO 171: 1266, LTC Thomson 'On action at Colombelles on 10/11 July'.

on the anti-tank gunners, their indispensability to the mission. Minimally, his absence from the operation meant that he could only react to reports from his headquarters. By the time the difficulties which 1 Gordons and 5 Black Watch were having had become apparent, it was already too late; the battle of Colombelles had been lost.

## **Conclusion**

However, 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division's failures should not be exaggerated; its performance was relatively poor but was not utterly disastrous. The Division held the line in the Triangle and successfully contributed to Operation Goodwood. The Division did not have to be withdrawn; neither did it collapse, like the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion, the Duke of Wellington's Regiment,<sup>80</sup> nor did it experience the kind of crisis which afflicted 90 US Infantry Division under the command of Brigadier General Mackelvie.<sup>81</sup> Under Bullen-Smith, the Highland Division retained some level of combat effectiveness, especially in defence. However, in July 1944 the Division performed badly in relation to its own past standards and in comparison to other British infantry divisions in Normandy at the time. Its failure should be seen as relative but it was none the less serious for that.

Although a number of factors contributed to the struggles of the Highland Division in Normandy, there is little doubt that the shortcomings of its commander, Major General Charles Bullen-Smith, were the critical factor. Charles Bullen-Smith failed to fulfill the three essential functions required of a commander. For the Colombelles operation he defined the Divisional mission incorrectly, did not resource it adequately and was unable to manage and supervise its execution. Finally, he had failed in the leadership needed to motivate his troops and unite his command and so realise the Division's true combat potential.

Bullen-Smith's inadequacies are highly suggestive of a direct relationship between command and combat effectiveness; they demonstrate how

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<sup>80</sup> Carlo D'Este, *Decision in Normandy*, (London: Pan, 1983), pp. 282-3.

<sup>81</sup> Harry Gole, *General William E DePuy: preparing the army for modern war*, (Lexington KT: University of Kentucky, 2008), pp.16-22; John Colby *War from the Ground Up: 90<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in WWII* (Austin Tx: Nortex, 1991).

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command can augment or undermine combat performance. The function of a commander is to maximise combat power by defining achievable missions and, then, orchestrating subordinates into a cohesive whole committed to mission accomplishment. Individual soldiers and small units may be able to fight without a formal system of command but large scale military formation require leadership and command which transforms the many and potentially disparate elements into a unified force. As Bullen-Smith's performance demonstrates, a bad commander can markedly and very quickly reduce combat effectiveness. Under a poor commander, a division does not operate as a unified force and its troops are not motivated to fight. Good command and leadership turns a collection of units into a formation.