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## The Test of Command: McNaughton and Exercise "Spartan," 4–12 March 1943

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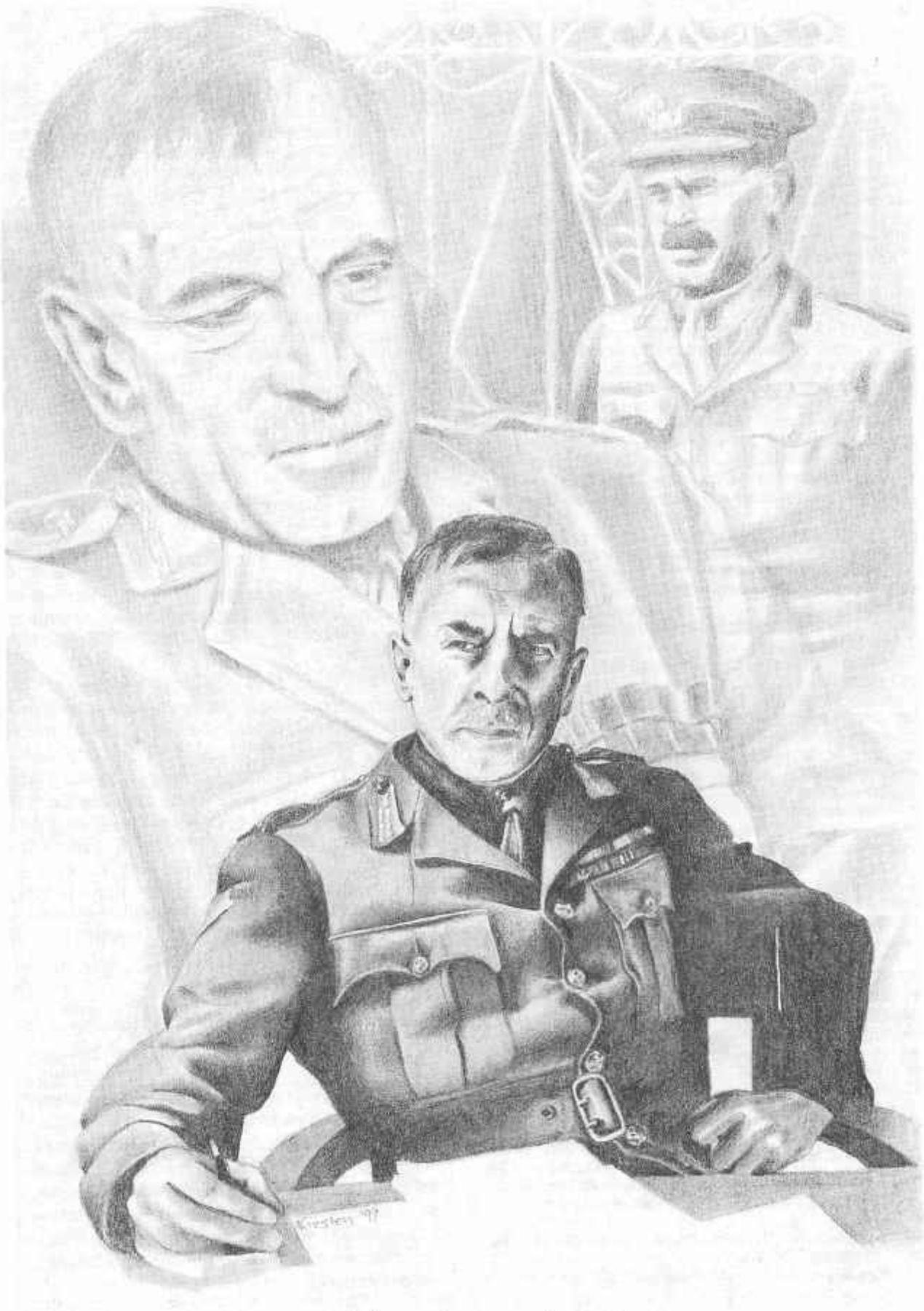
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*General A.G.L. (Andy) McNaughton*

# The Test of Command

## McNaughton and Exercise "Spartan,"

### 4-12 March 1943

**John Nelson Rickard**

The large-scale General Headquarters (GHQ) exercise known as "Spartan," held in the south of England during March 1943, was a significant event in the history of the Canadian Army in the Second World War. The purpose of "Spartan" was to test the army in the dual tasks of breaking out of an established bridgehead and making *the* transition to open warfare. As a direct result of shortcomings on the exercise, three Canadian generals lost their commands. Of greatest significance was the eventual relief of General A.G.L. McNaughton as commander of the First Canadian Army in November 1943.<sup>1</sup> During and after "Spartan" the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), General Sir Francis Alan Brooke, and the Commander-in-Chief of Home Forces, General Sir Bernard Paget, claimed that McNaughton's performance proved his incapacity to lead First Canadian Army in the field. In consequence, Brooke and Paget orchestrated his removal and Canadian military historians have generally supported their assessment. However, the considerable criticism directed at McNaughton resulting from "Spartan" has suffered from oversimplification.<sup>2</sup> This article will review McNaughton's performance during the exercise and assess its role in his relief.

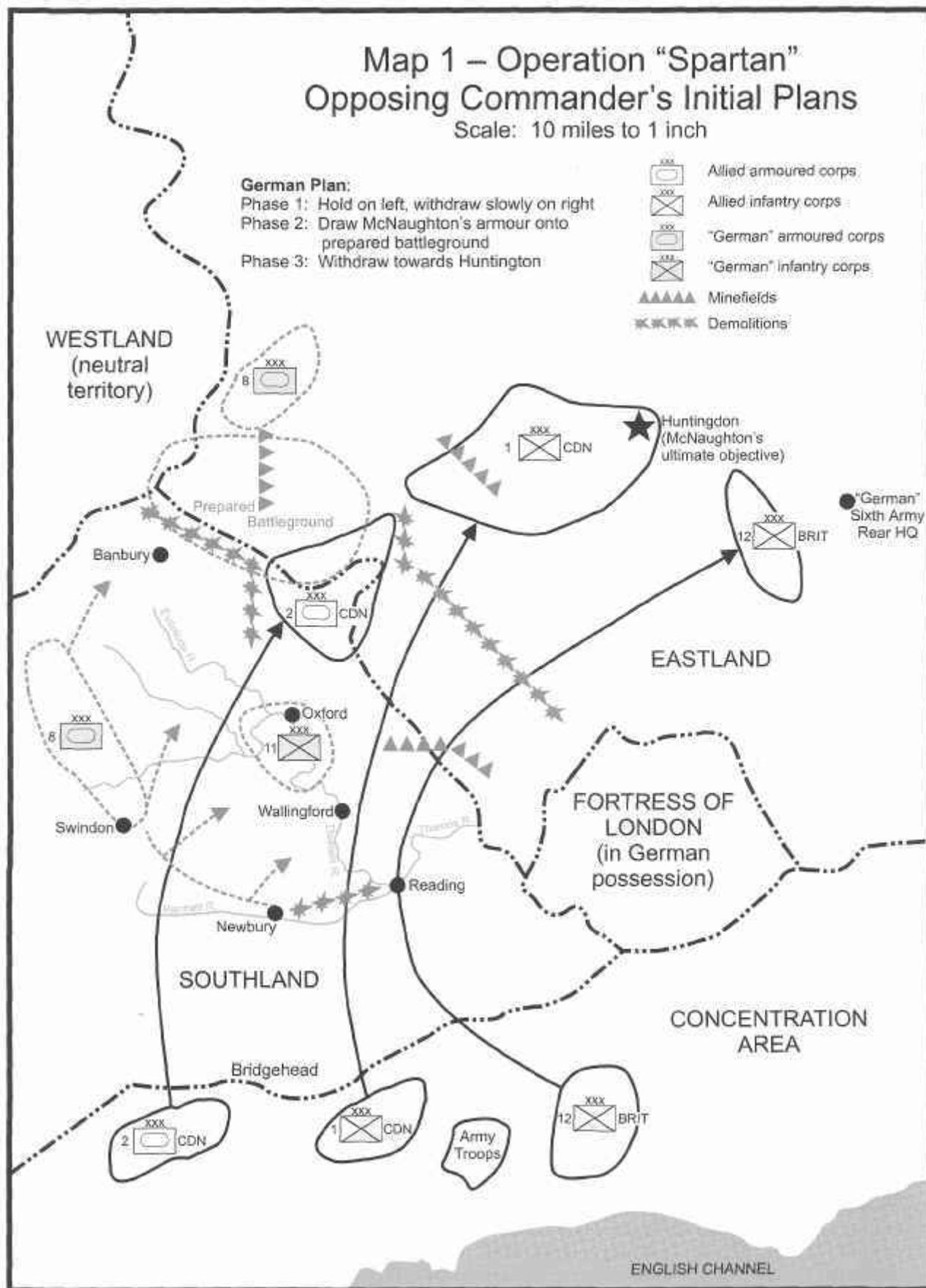
"Spartan," involving ten-plus divisions, was the largest field exercise held in Britain since Exercise "Bumper" in September 1941. For the exercise, most of southern England was divided into three areas: "Eastland," with its capital at Huntingdon, was a 'German' stronghold; "Southland," with boundaries extending to the outer defences of London (which was also under 'German' control), was theoretically recently invaded by the Allies and served as the established bridgehead from which Canadian

forces had to break out; "Westland" was neutral territory and McNaughton was under strict orders not to violate it (See Map 1).

The best tank country was along the "Westland" border but contained barriers to manoeuvre such as the Grand Union and Oxford Canals and the Evenlode and Windrush Rivers. In the east there were additional significant water obstacles. The Thames River ran west out of London and forked at Reading, continuing northward while the westward extension turned into the Kennet River. The southeast portion of "Eastland" close on London was characterized by additional canals and built-up areas known as the Chiltern Hundreds.<sup>3</sup> Thus terrain had an important role to play in the exercise.

Though not a major issue at the time, postwar criticism by British and Canadian commentators of McNaughton's performance began with his selection of participating units. As the commander of the British "Second Army" (facilitated by using the First Canadian Army Headquarters in the field for the first time), McNaughton was originally to command I Canadian Corps and two British corps, one of which was to be armoured.<sup>4</sup> This changed when McNaughton substituted II Canadian Corps Headquarters, newly created on 15 January, for the British armoured corps. Second Canadian Corps, however, was severely deficient in signals equipment and had never conducted a staff exercise or a tactical exercise without troops (TEWT).

For John English, who has offered the only in-depth analysis of McNaughton's role in the exercise, the question of II Canadian Corps'



inclusion came down to simple feasibility. Without such fundamental preparation, he noted, "the training value of the corps' participation [in "Spartan"] was clearly questionable."<sup>5</sup> Yet in his usually guarded form the Canadian official historian, C.P. Stacey, suggested that the rarity of such large-scale exercises made it "an opportunity not to be missed." Later in his memoirs Stacey voiced a more candid opinion, claiming that McNaughton's greatest mistake in "Spartan" was in "committing to it at all the green II Canadian Corps headquarters."<sup>6</sup> McNaughton, and certainly Lieutenant-General H.D.G. Crerar, however, already had great confidence in the level of training in I Canadian Corps<sup>7</sup> and McNaughton can hardly be blamed for trying to give II Canadian Corps some realistic large-scale training. Even Paget recognized the limited opportunity for big exercises.<sup>8</sup>

McNaughton's final order of battle therefore included I Canadian Corps (2nd and 3rd Canadian Infantry Divisions and 1 Canadian Army Tank Brigade) commanded by Crerar, II Canadian Corps (Guards Armoured and 5th Canadian Armoured Divisions) commanded by Lieutenant-General E.W. Sansom, and XII British Corps (43rd and 53rd Infantry Divisions), commanded by Lieutenant-General M.G.N. Stopford. McNaughton's opponent was Lieutenant-General J.H. Gammel, commanding the "German Sixth Army" of only two corps: 8 Corps (9th and 42nd Armoured Divisions) and 11 Corps (49th and 61st Infantry Divisions).

McNaughton faced further post-war criticism for concentrating his two armoured divisions in II Canadian Corps to begin with, and then placing them under Sansom who had no armoured experience.<sup>9</sup> The question of grouping the armoured divisions in one corps needs context. Montgomery, who commanded the Southeastern Army prior to leaving for the desert in August 1942, clearly had a powerful influence on Canadian army doctrine. In June of that year he drew attention to the lessons of Exercise "Tiger" and declared that although a well-balanced corps had two infantry divisions and one armoured division, an army commander could, as the battle progressed, "re-group his divisions, forming a Corps of two, or even three, armoured divisions."<sup>10</sup> Such thinking was easily disseminated to the Canadians because Montgomery was still in England and spread his

teachings with messianic fervor. In fact, at El Alamein in October-November 1942, Montgomery created his own *Corps de Chasse*, X Corps, composed of 1st and 10th Armoured Divisions. He was ultimately dissatisfied with the results, announcing that "I do not agree with the policy of keeping Armd. Divs. in separate Corps."<sup>11</sup> This observation was based on battle experience not exercises. It seems that Montgomery's desert armoured experiences were not quickly disseminated, and may not have gotten back to Home Forces prior to "Spartan."

McNaughton could have made I and II Canadian Corps more balanced with one infantry and one armoured division apiece, reducing his number of corps from three to two. But Crerar faced poor tank country in the centre and Stopford's zone near London offered little better prospect. In practice, Crerar failed to effectively employ even 1st Army Tank Brigade to maintain contact with enemy forces during the exercise.<sup>12</sup> McNaughton's options regarding the placement of the armoured divisions were thus limited by the terrain. It made sense to concentrate them on the left, where the ground offered better going, and there is little evidence to indicate that they would have been more effective elsewhere.

As for placing both armoured divisions under the inexperienced Sansom, McNaughton really had little choice in the matter. The question of battle experience is one that haunted the Canadian Army throughout the war and it is true that Sansom knew little of armoured warfare. Yet *none* of the senior Canadian officers, including Crerar, had any experience commanding armoured divisions in combat or even on exercise. Giving II Canadian Corps to a British officer with armoured experience was a possibility, but, it is fairly safe to say, not in McNaughton's eyes.

McNaughton's objective was to seize Huntingdon as rapidly as possible and secure and develop airfields, something he did not think possible without first destroying the bulk of Gammel's forces. McNaughton knew that Gammel's forces were divided into two main groups and believed he could defeat each in detail if he could manoeuvre between them with Crerar's I Canadian Corps. This would also prevent Gammel from concentrating against him.



### Cast of Characters

**Clockwise from top left:**

General Andrew McNaughton (left) and General Sir Alan Brooke [far right] confer with aides during a visit to Canadian troops in July 1940.

Major-General J.H. Roberts (second from left), commander of 2nd Canadian Infantry Division and Lieutenant-General H.D.G. Crerar (far right), commander of I Canadian Corps meet during Exercise "Spartan," 10 March 1943.

McNaughton (with binoculars) watches a tank battle take place from a 2-pounder anti-tank gun position during an exercise in May 1942.

General Sir Bernard Paget, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief Home Force during a visit to a Canadian HQ during "Spartan," 9 March 1943.

Major-General E.W. Sansom (saluting) during a marchpast by the British Columbia Dragoons, 12 March 1942. Sansom commanded II Canadian Corps during "Spartan."



Moreover, XII British Corps could not be concentrated until 48 hours after jumpoff (as per exercise rules), and since Sansom's II Canadian Corps was green, it made sense to lead off with his most experienced corps. McNaughton decided to advance straight on Huntingdon with Crerar's corps and have Sansom's armoured corps protect Crerar's left flank.

Paget suggested in his comments issued soon after the exercise that the better course would have been to conduct the main advance with I and II Canadian Corps west of the Thames to threaten Gammel's line of communications and pry him out of successive positions, thereby avoiding a direct assault across a serious water obstacle.<sup>13</sup> This was exactly what Gammel anticipated. His solution to being outnumbered was to erect a strong pivot in the Chilterns and swing back his right flank to the Thames-Cherwell Rivers through Banbury and try to draw the "British" armour into the open area on the west covered by minefields and extensive demolitions. Then he would concentrate and counterattack McNaughton north of Banbury. Gammel had little desire to seek decisive armoured action until the situation was in his favour.<sup>14</sup> McNaughton's plan then was a sound one and would have disrupted Gammel's defensive dispositions.

The exercise commenced with GHQ presenting both commanders an unexpected situation to "test the flexibility" of their plans. McNaughton had not envisioned advancing before first light on 5 March, but GHQ allowed the Germans to move first. Gammel quickly pushed into "Southland" to gain much-needed depth and time to effect extensive demolitions, especially of bridges, well forward of his main position. It does not appear that McNaughton fully appreciated the effects of such a development.<sup>15</sup>

At 0800 hours on 4 March, a day ahead of schedule, McNaughton was ordered to begin his advance as soon as possible. After speaking with Crerar and Sansom, he fixed the time to move at 1200 hours that day. While Paget identified some confusion in the early stages of this accelerated movement, he stated that, "In view of the difficulties the speed with which the advance began was a most credible effort."<sup>16</sup> In less than five hours McNaughton had his corps' moving and stuck to his original plan in the face of

Gammel's preemptive move, fearing that XII British Corps could not be pushed northeast into line if Crerar was held up.<sup>17</sup> Thus McNaughton deserves some credit for achieving speed at the outset and for taking the changed circumstances in stride.

Throughout 4 March contact was made with Gammel's center and left. By first light on the 5th Crerar had elements across the Thames at Sonning, and the 5th Canadian Armoured Division had crossed the Kennet River at Hungerford by 0800 hours. At 1030 hours Sansom was ordered to halt and occupy the Swindon-Hungerford area even though enemy forces had already withdrawn. McNaughton was cautious with his armoured divisions in the early stages, and Paget was rightly critical of him for leaving II Canadian Corps to guard the army's left flank throughout 6 and 7 March when the two opposing armoured forces were 50 miles apart.<sup>18</sup>

At 0335 hours on 6 March McNaughton concluded that he was being held up by light forces and had yet to come to grips with the enemy's main body. Gammel had pivoted as intended on his left which produced severe fighting there, but withdrew his center and right. McNaughton decided to bring XII British Corps into play to continue the attack in relief of I Canadian Corps so Crerar could prepare for a suspected armoured counterattack.<sup>19</sup> The advance of XII British Corps succeeded in breaking Gammel's pivot but enemy air action and the slowness of Stopford's move allowed Gammel to reform the pivot further back.

Apparently, McNaughton had trouble deciding how best to proceed at this point. He had a host of visitors in the morning of the 6th, Air Marshals Sir Charles Portal and Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory at 1030 hours, and Sir Archibald Sinclair, Secretary of State for Air, at 1140 hours. Most importantly, however, Paget and Sir James Grigg, the Secretary of State for War, showed up at 1245 hours. In a post war interview with Marian C. Long, Arthur Bryant's research assistant, Grigg recalled visiting McNaughton in his operations room and being appalled at his indecision. "Intelligence was coming in," Grigg stated, "and McNaughton stood in front of his situation map hesitating as to what to do and what orders to issue."<sup>20</sup>

Grigg's assessment may or may not reflect the reality of the situation, but McNaughton certainly had a lot to think about. McNaughton knew Gammel was trying to canalize the British armour along the "Westland" border and he wanted to keep the initiative by continuing to force Gammel to withdraw in front of Crerar in the centre. Moreover, sometime prior to 1630 hours, 6 March (perhaps at 1130 hours when he was briefed by his GSO 1), McNaughton received a captured operations order from the 49th Infantry Division outlining its intention to withdraw from the area Wallingford-Abingdon. It also provided valuable intelligence on the future moves of the 61st Infantry Division. McNaughton's subsequent decision based on the captured orders was the key factor in his eventual relief from command of First Canadian Army.

At 1630 hours on 6 March McNaughton cancelled the relief of I Canadian Corps by XII British Corps and issued new instructions. Sansom, who was visiting Army headquarters at the time, was directed to move II Canadian Corps to an assembly area *east* of the Thames and prepare to move northeast *to* cut 11 Corps' lines of communication. It appears that McNaughton now intended to bring his armoured corps in between Crerar and Stopford to pursue the withdrawing enemy. To facilitate this new movement across the Thames, McNaughton directed that Class 40 bridges be built at Wallingford, Shillington and Abingdon by the afternoon of the 7th at the latest, less than 24 hours away.<sup>21</sup>

McNaughton's decision to move II Canadian Corps east across the Thames was harshly condemned at the time and subsequently because it entailed moving the corps across the lines of communication of I Canadian Corps at night. Moreover, it also would have put all three of his corps between Oxford and Reading on a frontage of only 30 miles. GHQ indicated that Gammel was retreating behind the Ouse River heading for the Grand Union Canal as of 0045 hours, 7 March. As the exercise narrative stated, GHQ deemed it "essential" that McNaughton "should bring the enemy to battle with the maximum British force before he reached the canal position."<sup>22</sup> The quickest way to close on the enemy was with an armoured advance, but Sansom's corps was not in position to execute McNaughton's strategy quickly.

At 0700 hours on the 7th McNaughton was up analyzing the bridging problems confronting the movement of Sansom's armour across the Thames. By midday McNaughton considered the situation unsatisfactory at Wallingford and Abingdon although the Shillingford bridge was nearly complete. Contrary to John Swettenham's misinformed assertion, McNaughton did not then rush off to the bridging sites. He never left headquarters the entire day and his war diary clearly proves this.<sup>23</sup> He did go forward the next day at 1330 hours and returned to headquarters by 2040 hours. Yet the assumption has long been that McNaughton raced off to the bridging sites on the 7th and stayed there all day micro-managing the efforts. On the contrary, on the 8th he did spend a little more than an hour at Pangbourne, Wallingford and Shillingford, but the rest of the day was taken up in visits to airfields and rear divisional headquarters.<sup>24</sup>

Though McNaughton was not guilty of the excessive micro-managing often ascribed to him at this stage, his roaming at the front nevertheless obviously bothered Paget who felt that the tendency of commanders to go forward "must be curbed." As Paget explained, "Commanders on the higher levels can fight their battles only from their HQ where they are fully in the picture and have full signals facilities."<sup>25</sup> One only has to read of the numerous routine forward visits in the diaries of Dempsey, Montgomery, Patton and a host of other senior commanders at a variety of levels to see that Paget's view was far too rigid. During the battle of France Guderian moved forward from XIXth Panzer Corps HQ and personally intervened to hurry tanks across the bridge at Gaulier on the outskirts of Sedan on the Meuse River.<sup>26</sup>

At 0950 hours, 7 March McNaughton was visited by Alanbrooke and General Sir Ronald Adam, Adjutant General, for less than an hour. Brooke's long-standing anxiety about McNaughton's command ability was reinforced by the morning visit. He noted in his diary at the time that McNaughton was "quite incompetent to command an army!" and "He does not know how to begin to cope with the job and was tying up his force into the most awful muddle."<sup>27</sup> Brooke was no doubt referring to McNaughton's passing Sansom's corps through Crerar's.

Canadian Forces Photo 13945, courtesy DHH



**Top:** Canadian Engineers of I Canadian Corps work to assemble a pontoon bridge across an English river during Exercise "Spartan." Theoretically, the permanent bridge was "destroyed."

**Right:** One of numerous bridges constructed during "Spartan" has been finished allowing the advance to continue.



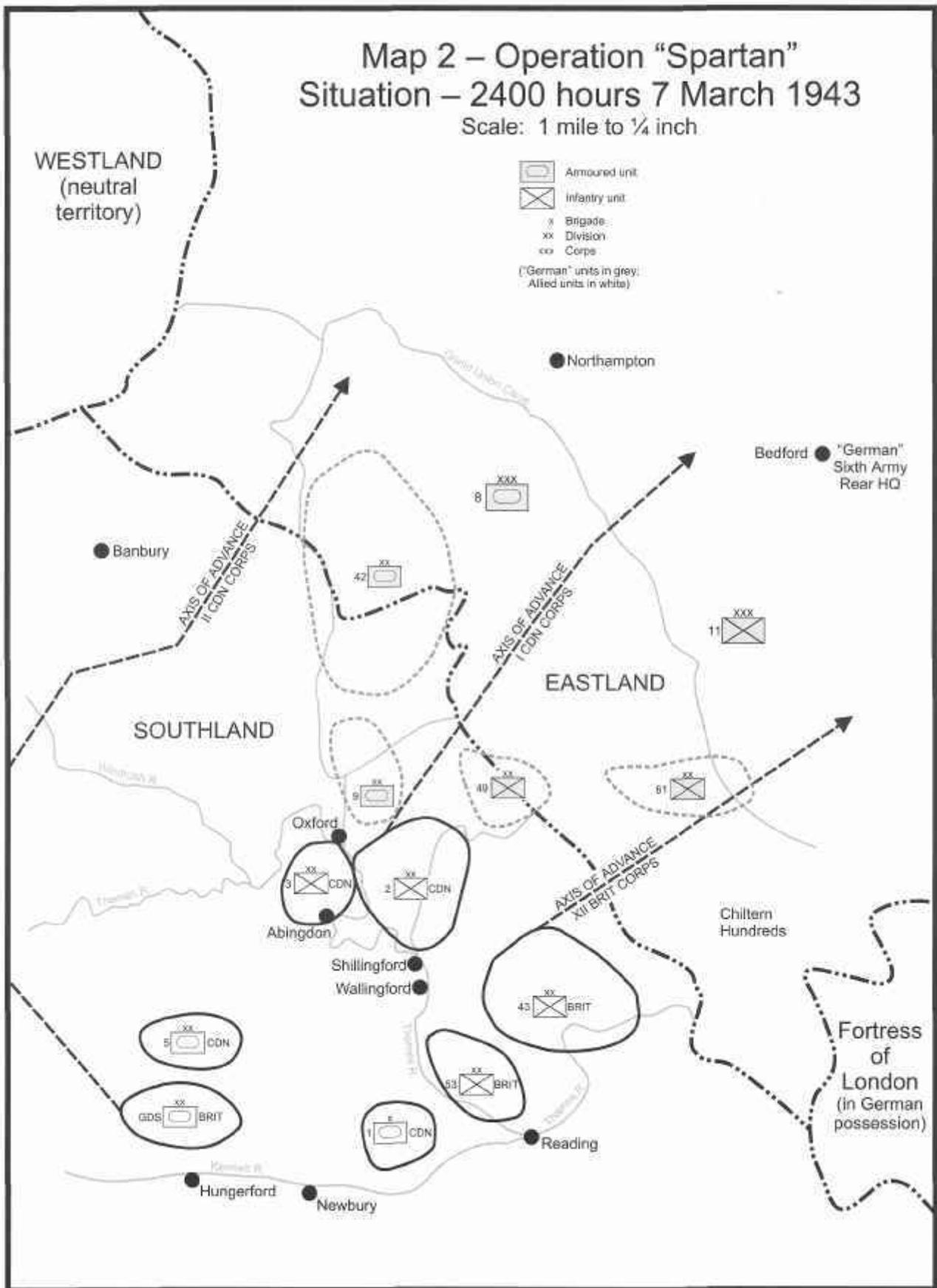
In fact, by 1200 hours, 7 March McNaughton was rethinking this complicated move and considered an advance - rather than a screening operation - on the left with II Canadian Corps to Banbury. Several reasons may have provoked this re-evaluation. The "Spartan" narrative stated that the difficulty of moving II Canadian Corps across the rear of I Canadian Corps, and the risk of concentrating both corps between Oxford and Reading in a bottleneck with only four bridges, were factors which influenced his thinking.<sup>28</sup> But if these were the reasons, it took McNaughton almost 20 hours to act upon them. Moreover, intelligence received at 1525 hours indicating that Gammel had ceased his withdrawal to the canal, no doubt reinforced his intention of pushing II Canadian Corps west, and additionally of trying now to effect a pincer movement with XII British Corps. Stacey stated that the "circumstances in which McNaughton changed his mind are not recorded,"<sup>29</sup> but Brooke may very well have influenced the change during his visit through disapproving body language, tone, or outright suggestion of the difficulty of passing one corps through another.

Whatever the circumstances, by 1605 hours McNaughton made the decision to push XII British Corps and I Canadian Corps north and northeast and II Canadian Corps *west* (See Map 2). Paget stated that this decision "was undoubtedly the correct one" because the best way to exploit superior forces was to stretch the enemy's front.<sup>30</sup> Warning orders went out at 1615 hours to Sansom and 1630 hours to Crerar and Stopford. Detailed written orders were issued at 1740 hours. Apparently, Stopford was "reluctant to make so sudden a move"<sup>31</sup> because he was not fully concentrated. McNaughton telephoned him at 2110 hours and "impressed upon him the necessity for determined advance."<sup>32</sup> In pressing Stopford in this instance, and Sansom in subsequent situations, McNaughton clearly demonstrated that he possessed a measure of driving power even if his grip was at times questionable. Thus McNaughton was carrying out the plan Gammel had originally anticipated but Gammel's armour was no longer in position to decisively counterattack Sansom's spearheads. However, as the narrative stated, "It was problematical whether II Canadian Corps could advance with sufficient speed to gain the advantage."<sup>33</sup>

The concern with speed was a fair one, since II Canadian Corps was now re-aligned for a move east and had been preparing to do so for 24 hours. The result of the counter orders was that in most cases units and lower formations started the move west up to three hours late. At 1930 hours, 7 March, Guards Armoured Division began a 48 mile move to its first concentration area. By 0900 hours the next morning it arrived and waited almost ten hours for 5th Canadian Armoured Division to concentrate. The average speed of advance by the armoured divisions was a paltry five miles an hour. Stacey felt that the lack of speed by II Canadian Corps, and in particular 5th Canadian Armoured Division, was not surprising due to the lack of signals equipment and training of signals units. For 15 hours the Corps was out of direct wireless touch with McNaughton's headquarters due to wireless silence. Personnel handling new types of sets for the first time did not help matters either.<sup>34</sup> "It should moreover be remembered," Stacey added, "that this was the first occasion on which the whole of the 5th Division was actually exercised together as a formation."<sup>35</sup>

The real problem, however, was traffic control. Between 1530 hours and 1730 hours on 8 March the administrative groups of Guards Armoured Division were mixed up with the fighting elements of 5th Canadian Armoured Division. At 1900 hours Guards Armoured moved on to its forward concentration area southwest of Banbury without waiting for 5th Armoured and arrived at 0600 hours 9 March. Movement remained sluggish due to the demolitions Gammel had prepared at the start of the exercise and the continued traffic problems. A major jam occurred throughout the 9th when II Canadian Corps' rear areas were clogged with double lines of vehicles.<sup>36</sup> At 1800 hours McNaughton telephoned Sansom with orders to press on quickly. At 2000 hours both of Sansom's divisions had reached the Canal north of Banbury and prepared to turn in on the mass of Gammel's force.

By 1600 hours March 10 Sansom's armour was finally in a position to threaten Gammel's force and was replenished by 3rd line transport at 1800 hours. Yet orders for a further advance were cancelled at 1830 hours.<sup>37</sup> The narrative does not state by whom but the logical suggestion is Sansom not McNaughton, who was trying to



urge II Canadian Corps forward instead of halting it. After searching for Stopford on the 9th to stress "the need for speed" from XII British Corps, McNaughton tried to communicate with Sansom from a No. 9 wireless set at 2330 hours to stress the necessity to move forward "as fast as humanly possible." It is not apparent that contact was ever made; communications were extremely poor.<sup>38</sup>

On 11 March McNaughton realized that the pincer had failed and decided to have Sansom's Corps advance northeast on the left of Crerar's. In effecting this new assignment, Sansom took the incredible step of stripping 5th Canadian Armoured Division of its armoured brigade and exchanged it for the Guards Armoured Division's infantry brigade. Thus 5th Armoured, with infantry only, was tasked to hunt tanks and Guards Armoured, without infantry, was sent off in an advance. Such radical re-grouping had been severely criticized by Montgomery in previous exercises. McNaughton, when he heard of this, immediately did the right thing and sent off a message to Sansom at 0950 hours March 11 ordering him to "re-establish normal organization armd divs forthwith."<sup>39</sup> This was impossible before 1800 hours and the result was the near destruction of the Guards Armoured armoured brigade, when, without infantry support, it attacked carefully selected infantry positions reinforced by substantial anti-tank assets.<sup>40</sup> The next morning at 0900 hours, 12 March, GHQ announced the cease-fire.

A superficial examination of McNaughton's performance on "Spartan" would suggest that he had done moderately well because he was on the verge of achieving his objective when the cease-fire sounded. Paget noted that after the 8th, "the situation swung steadily in favour of the British who had begun to overcome their handicap of their lines of communication across the Thames."<sup>41</sup> There is little grounds for Swettenham's assertion that McNaughton displayed "superior generalship"<sup>42</sup> but the question remains: was McNaughton's performance poor enough to warrant relief?

Any discussion of McNaughton's performance must be considered in the context of Brooke's obsession with military professionalism. Brooke's first priority as CIGS was creating a battle-worthy field army capable of taking on the

tactically advanced and battle-hardened Germans. He and Montgomery had been appalled at the weaknesses in leadership of the BEF in France in 1940 and the question of finding suitable commanders stayed with them throughout the war. It cannot be overstated how much the bitter experience of Dunkirk influenced them both. After Exercise "Bumper" in September 1941 Brooke knew the British Army was unprofessional and therefore in serious trouble. He noted in his diary that, "It is lamentable how poor we are as regards Army and Corps Commanders, we ought to remove several of them, but heaven knows where we shall find anything very much better."<sup>43</sup>

Brooke's credibility as a judge of commanders rested on more than his powerful position as CIGS. Though commanding the British II Corps in France in 1940 for only a short time, historians have given him high marks for the steady way in which he fought the retreat to Dunkirk. France was his only battlefield command during the war but nevertheless Brooke's stature was immense and one gets the impression of a very stable, fully modern mind at work relentlessly dedicated to rebuilding the British Army. Paget, on the other hand, never commanded a large formation in the field and pales beside the professionalism of Brooke.<sup>44</sup>

McNaughton's professionalism, then, is a critical aspect of the "Spartan" manoeuvres. On the surface McNaughton could boast the standard credentials for high command. He attended the Staff College at Camberley in 1921 and received excellent evaluations. Major-General Hastings Anderson wrote of McNaughton at that time that he possessed a "wide general knowledge, and brings a highly trained, scientific mind to bear on all military problems." He also had a "good knowledge of staff duties."<sup>45</sup> In 1927 McNaughton attended the Imperial Defence College to broaden his outlook, another prerequisite to high command. John English nonetheless suggests that the general impression historians have gained over the years is that McNaughton "dabbled superficially in the military art."<sup>46</sup> Concerning "Spartan," English concluded that his operational grip "reflected a lack of professional knowledge that could have been acquired through study."<sup>47</sup>



NAC PA 145537



NAC PA 146661

*Above, right 82, below left: Various scenes of Churchill tanks from the Three Rivers Regiment taking part in Exercise "Spartan," 8 March 1943*

*Below right: Two soldiers from Le Régiment de Maisonneuve during "Spartan."*

*(Photos by Alexander M. Stirton)*



NAC PA 154303



NAC PA 145539



NAC PA 177138

It is evident from the testimony of a number of individuals that McNaughton devoted excessive amounts of time to the science side of war at the expense of leadership and training. Brigadier G.E. Beament, Brigadier, General Staff (BGS) of First Canadian Army, stated that McNaughton was too interested in weapons development,<sup>48</sup> an opinion definitely shared by Brooke. Months after "Spartan" Paget told McNaughton personally that he was "too much absorbed on the technical side at the expense of training and command."<sup>49</sup> Brigadier N.E. Rodger, Guy Simonds' Chief of Staff, echoed Paget's criticism after the war.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, when Paget first visited McNaughton during "Spartan" on 6 March he was treated to an analysis of the Canadian high-velocity anti-tank gun and the 120 mm mortar.<sup>51</sup>

Hastings Anderson noted in his 1921 assessment of McNaughton that he was perfectly capable of functioning either in command or staff duties "under conditions of modern war."<sup>52</sup> Liddell Hart, who befriended McNaughton just two years later, felt that during the Second World War he was a soldier of "outstanding vision and ability, who grasped the conditions of modern warfare earlier and more fully than most others"<sup>53</sup> However, McNaughton's grasp of armoured warfare does not appear to have been sharply honed by the time of "Spartan," even after four years of wartime training in England.

Including the green II Canadian Corps in "Spartan," and giving the inexperienced Sansom command of both armoured divisions, hardly worked to McNaughton's advantage, but these decisions were not fatal sins. Nor do they suggest that he did not know what he was doing. Operationally, however, there were significant problems. In his operations order for 6 March he stated that "speed is essential.. formations will be handled boldly and widely, full advantage being taken of possibilities of accelerating movement and action against the enemy, by proceeding across country."<sup>54</sup> Yet remarkably, there were only three armour versus armour actions during the entire exercise, and two of those were initiated by Gammel even though McNaughton was the aggressor. Although McNaughton felt that in the first two days the formations and units "have been too deliberate in their procedure,"<sup>55</sup> he never utilized his armour aggressively until the last days of the exercise and repeatedly lost contact with the enemy's main body.

This certainly suggested caution or operational amateurism and Brooke clearly would have looked disparagingly on McNaughton's inability to bring the enemy armour to battle. In commenting on Exercise "Bumper" in 1941, Brooke, then C-in-C Home Forces, stated that "The location and destruction of these armoured forces must be the main preoccupation of a commander, who must therefore understand fully the handling of his own armoured forces, which will be his main instrument for destroying those of the enemy."<sup>56</sup> There is little reason to suspect that he had changed his mind in this regard and it is logical to assume that the dexterous and effective employment of armoured forces was a critical criteria for him in judging success on "Spartan." McNaughton's failure in the handling of the armoured divisions thus probably stuck out prominently in the mind of a man who had thoroughly worked out his own thoughts on armoured warfare.

McNaughton may have kept the weaknesses in training of his armoured divisions and Sansom's inexperience in mind when conducting operations. Montgomery stated in his "Main Lessons of the Battle" after El Alamein that commanders had to conduct operations "in keeping with the standard of training of his troops."<sup>57</sup> But Montgomery took great pride in knowing his commanders and units intimately and thus was well positioned to make accurate judgements on their abilities. This same quality is not readily apparent in McNaughton because he simply never gained a good reputation for adequately training senior officers.<sup>58</sup> In April 1941 Brooke attended a Canadian Corps exercise. McNaughton was sick and his Chief-of-Staff, Miles C. Dempsey, showed Brooke around. In his diary Brooke recorded: "Rather depressed at the standard of training and efficiency of Canadian Divisional and Brigade Commanders. A great pity to see such excellent material as the Canadian men controlled by such indifferent commanders."<sup>59</sup>

In the end, McNaughton's greatest mistake during the exercise was not, as Stacey suggested, including a green corps headquarters. His greatest error was the decision to pass II Canadian Corps through I Canadian Corps at night. Liddell Hart watched "Spartan" personally and commented after the war that "Unfortunately

things went wrong in the early stages, and a bad traffic jam occurred in getting 2nd Canadian Corps through the bottle-neck area around Oxford." The principal fault, as he saw it, was not with McNaughton but with "Some of his chief subordinate commanders."<sup>60</sup> There is no doubt that Sansom was unskilled in the handling of armoured divisions but the argument that McNaughton was ill-served by his subordinates misses the essential point that the decision to shift the axis of II Canadian Corps was McNaughton's alone.

Liddell Hart apparently saw nothing wrong with this type of manoeuvre in the first place but Brooke obviously did. Brooke had been highly critical of the future Field Marshal Harold Alexander for a laborious move of 2nd Canadian Infantry Division in the rear of 25th Army Tank Brigade during Exercise "Bumper," an action which robbed Alexander of operational flexibility.<sup>61</sup> Alexander survived "Bumper," but Brooke never felt comfortable with his ability.

McNaughton's decision to pass II Canadian Corps through I Canadian Corps was bad enough, but his entire approach to operations revealed more serious weaknesses. Ordering countermoves created uncertainty and interfered with vehicle maintenance. For instance, at 1630 hours on 6 March he ordered II Canadian Corps east across the Thames and at 1615 hours the next day countermanded the order, directing the corps west. As Table 1 indicates, even his basic timings for normal operations the next day were far too optimistic to ensure orderly execution and ultimate success. Obviously, McNaughton visualized what he wanted to do operationally in very short timeframes, a bad trait for an army commander. As Paget correctly stated in his comments, "Corps cannot be swung about on the battlefield like battalions and should be given at least 24 hours' warning."<sup>62</sup> In reality, they should be given even more time.

Intimately connected with McNaughton's ill-conceived timings was a serious problem with bridging. "Plans for bridging," Paget noted, "never caught up with the operations and were never more than one day ahead of the advance."<sup>63</sup> The problem was simply that McNaughton never fully grasped the effect of Gammel's dash into "Southland" and never recovered from this initial failure. Some 60 bridges were constructed by

4 March	2130 hours for Army operations on 5 March
6 March	1630 hours cancels relief of I Canadian Corps by XII Brit Corps; orders II Canadian Corps to move east across Thames (confirmed in writing 2335 hours)
7 March	1615 hours (warning order) for II Canadian Corps to move west
8 March	2025 hours for Army operations on 9 March
9 March	1800 hours for Army operations on 10 March
10 March	2130 hours for II Canadian Corps operations on 11 March
11 March	2255 hours for Army operations on 12 March

McNaughton's army during "Spartan" of which only half were used. As the Chief Engineer of Home Forces noted,

By far the greater part of the delay imposed on the British advance was accounted for by the time taken to deploy resources. In an advance a CRE [Commander Royal Engineers] must be planning for tomorrow; he must be able to look ahead 48 hours. The CE [Chief Engineer] of a Corps must be able to look ahead 3 days. The CE of an Army must be able to look ahead 4 days at least. There must be a plan.<sup>64</sup>

Paget felt that the repeated traffic jams were avoidable since "ample roads in both army areas and the density of movement was comparatively light" but "no army traffic plan was formulated."<sup>65</sup> Thus congestion and its corresponding negative effects on operations were inevitable.

There is some evidence that McNaughton was never keenly interested in fully developing the capacity of the Army headquarters to function smoothly in the field. When such attempts were made on previous exercises, Brigadier Beament declared that McNaughton paid such efforts mere lip service.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, Guy Simonds, the most professional soldier Canada produced during the war, declared upon evaluating the various "Spartan" reports that, "the main conclusions [of the C-in-C Home Forces] indicating weaknesses



Canadian Forces Photo 14021, courtesy DHH

**Top left:** English tankers surrender to soldiers from 3 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment, RCA during Exercise "Spartan."

**Bottom, left:** An "enemy" tank crew is captured by an armoured car crew from 7th Recce Regiment.



Canadian Forces Photo 14057, courtesy DHH

British commanders had to go as well for the sake of combat efficiency, a fact which undermines the suggestion that McNaughton was relieved because he was Canadian.<sup>70</sup>

The irony of the situation is that McNaughton's replacement in command of First Canadian Army, Harry Crerar, had no battle experience either. His selection shows the dearth of high-ranking Canadian officers in place to assume important commands. Indeed, only Guy Simonds went through the logical sequence of commanding a division in combat in preparation for commanding a corps in combat and subsequently briefly commanding First Canadian Army. However, Brooke was genuinely more impressed with Crerar's professionalism than McNaughton's. During "Spartan" Brooke also visited Crerar and I Canadian Corps and noted that he had put on "a real good show" and had "improved that Corps out of all recognition."<sup>71</sup> Even Montgomery, no fan of Crerar's in Normandy, noted of a mid-1942 exercise that the "Canadians did splendidly, and were well commanded by Crerar."<sup>72</sup>

in organization and training...[were] substantiated by events during the exercise."<sup>67</sup> Thus, after three and a half years of training in England, McNaughton's skill in directing an army was simply not up to standard.

Brooke had been concerned with McNaughton's leadership since 1941. In his "Notes for My Memoirs," Brooke wrote that "The more I saw of the Canadian Corps at that time the more convinced I became that Andy McNaughton had not got the required qualities of command. He did not know his subordinate commanders properly and was lacking in tactical outlook. It stood out clearly that he would have to be relieved of his command."<sup>68</sup> Brooke felt strong enough about McNaughton's professional weaknesses to declare that, "I felt that I could not accept the responsibility of allowing the Canadian Army to go into action under his orders."<sup>69</sup> Brooke also recognized that several

McNaughton knew that "Spartan" was designed to assess the physical endurance of the troops and their proficiency in tactics, but he also characterized it as "a strict test...of the ability of commanders and staffs to administer, handle and fight their formations and units."<sup>73</sup> Stacey suggested that McNaughton probably never even considered "the possibility that a poor performance by the army might reflect on himself"<sup>74</sup> but this seems unrealistic. McNaughton did not have to exhibit Napoleonic brilliance but a solid performance would have gone a long way to solidifying his position as commander of First Canadian Army. His lack of professionalism was readily apparent during the exercise, however, and the entire episode must be placed within the context of Brooke's earnest desire to prepare the army for the return to the continent of Europe.

## Notes

1. The other two Canadian generals relieved were Major-General J. Hamilton Roberts of 2 Canadian Infantry Division and Lieutenant-General E.W. Sansom of II Canadian Corps.
2. For all too general condemnations of McNaughton see Desmond Morton, *A Military History of Canada* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1990), p.212 and J.L. Granatstein, *The Generals: The Canadian Army's Senior Commanders in the Second World War* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1993), pp.71-72.
3. H.D.G. Crerar, "Spartan Appreciation, 16 February 1943," National Archives of Canada [NAC] RG 24, Vol. 10832, File 229C1.8(D7).
4. McNaughton to Lieutenant-General F.E. Morgan, CGS, GHQ, Home Forces, File 212CHD30), Directorate of History and Heritage [DHH], Ottawa.
5. John A. English, *The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign: A Study of Failure in High Command* (New York: Praeger, 1991), p. 144. English found it odd that McNaughton had chosen to exclude 4th Canadian Armoured Division on grounds of insufficient advanced training but quickly included the new II Canadian Corps.
6. CP. Stacey, *The Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War*, Vol. I: *Six Years of War* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1956), p.249; CP. Stacey, *A Date With History: Memoirs of a Canadian Historian* (Ottawa: Deneau, 1976), p. 116.
7. In late February 1943 Crerar announced that "The formations and units of I Cdn Corps are generally regarded, and quite logically so, as the best trained troops in the United Kingdom." "Exercise Spartan," File 229C1.9(C2), DHH.
8. General Sir Bernard Paget, "GHQ Exercise 'Spartan': Comments by C-in-C Home Forces, March 1943," File 545.033(D1), DHH, p.12.
9. English, *The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign*, p. 144. Oddly enough, when Crerar was Chief of Staff in late 1941 he suggested an armoured corps of two divisions. Stacey, *Six Years of War*, p.95. It is not clear who was to command the British armoured division in the original order of battle or whether or not he had experience handling armoured divisions.
10. Montgomery, "Southeast Army: Exercise Tiger', Final Conference, 4 June 1942", File 171.009(D4), DHH. It is true, however, that he saw no need for special armoured corps headquarters.
11. Nigel Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield 1942-1944* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1983), p. 150. Monty had little problem with the performance of the infantry tanks but had tremendous problems with armoured officers converted from cavalry. Canada escaped the burden of being laden with large numbers of former cavalry officers who retained their outmoded ideas.
12. Crerar consistently kept 1 Army Tank Brigade in Corps reserve. See I Canadian Corps Operation Orders 6-12, "Exercise Spartan Orders and Instructions," NAC RG 24, Vol.10832, File 229C1.8(D7).
13. Paget, "Comments by C-in-C Home Forces," p.6.
14. "GHQ Exercise 'Spartan': Narrative of Events, March 1943," File 545.033(D1), DHH, p.6.
15. Paget, "Comments by C-in-C Home Forces," p.9.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
17. "Narrative of Events," p.8. If this happened Crerar was directed to move northwest on Oxford and give XII British Corps room to deploy.
18. Paget, "Comments by C-in-C Home Forces," p. 11.
19. Crerar was aware of this possibility. His intelligence estimate predicted an "all-out attack by German armour on the left flank of I Cdn Corps." I Cdn Corps Intelligence Summary No. 9, 1800 hours, March 7, NAC RG 24, Vol.10832.
20. Sir James Grigg interview with Marian C Long, n.d., Alanbrooke Papers, 11/82, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives (LHCMA), King's College, London.
21. "Narrative of Events," p.22.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
23. McNaughton War Diary, 7 March 1943, McNaughton Papers, MG 30 E133, Vol.249, NAC. Swettenham stated that "on the 7th he went forward to the bridging sites to imbue the engineers with a sense of urgency. At 4 P.M., it was reported, the bridge situation had improved." *McNaughton* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1969), II: p.227. Swettenham's source was the "Spartan" narrative which makes no declaration that McNaughton went forward on the 7th. All it states is that "By midday General McNaughton realized that the bridge situation was unsatisfactory." "Narrative of Events," p. 13.
24. McNaughton War Diary, 8 March 1943. P.A.S. Todd, Commander Corps, Royal Artillery of II Canadian Corps, although not identifying the exercise as "Spartan" specifically, stated that McNaughton was at a crossroads directing traffic during a big traffic jam. J.L. Granatstein Interviews, 8 May 1991, DHH.
25. Paget, "Comments by C-in-C Home Forces", p. 14.
26. Robert A. Doughty, *The Breaking Point: Sedan and the Fall of France* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1990), p.328. Doughty noted that the French generals, notably Grandsard and Huntziger, "remained tied to their command posts." Guderian actually watched the crossing of his infantry elements for two hours before crossing himself and roaming around in the very forward lines. Florian K. Rothbrust, *Guderian's XIXth Panzer Corps and the Battle of France* (New York: Praeger, 1990), p.74.
27. Alanbrooke Papers, 5/2/20.
28. "Narrative of Events," p. 14.
29. CP. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada, 1939-1945* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1970), p.235. Stacey added only that McNaughton's diary "establishes that General Brooke visited him on the morning of 7 March, between the issuance of the warning order and its cancellation."
30. Paget, "Comments by C-in-C Home Forces," p.9.
31. "Narrative of Events," p. 14.
32. McNaughton War Diary, 7 March 1943.
33. "Narrative of Events," p. 15.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 18. Obviously, signals were extremely important. British armoured doctrine made it clear that "Since the fighting efficiency of an armoured division and its component units is largely dependent on the reliability of its communications, it is essential that not only communications personnel, but all officers, should have adequate training in this subject." Military Training Pamphlet No. 41, "The Tactical Handling of an

- Armoured Division and Its Components, Part I," War Office, July 1943, p.26.
35. Stacey, *Six Years of War*, p.250. It does not seem inappropriate to utilize this defence; the same excuse has been repeatedly used to explain the poor showing of the 4th Canadian Armoured Division in Normandy which never exercised as a complete division prior to entering combat in August 1944.
  36. Paget, "Comments by C-in-C Home Forces," p.30.
  37. "Narrative of Events," p.20.
  38. McNaughton War Diary, 9 March 1943.
  39. "Narrative of Events," p.21.
  40. *Ibid.*, p.22.
  41. Paget, "Comments by C-in-C Home Forces," p.10.
  42. Swettenham, *McNaughton*, II: p.283.
  43. Alanbrooke Papers, 5/2/16, p.299.
  44. David Fraser declared Paget to be "perhaps the best trainer of soldiers the Army would possess for a generation" in the interwar period. David Fraser, *Alanbrooke* (London: Collins, 1982), p.86. Montgomery, however, felt him "completely ignorant of practical battle knowledge." Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield*, p. 174. Even Brooke would announce privately after "Spartan" that Paget "has no idea how bad Andy McNaughton really is." Alanbrooke Papers, 5/2/20.
  45. Swettenham, *McNaughton*, I: p. 191.
  46. English, *The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign*, p. 154, fn 6.
  47. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
  48. Granatstein Interviews, 24 May 1991, DHH.
  49. Paget to McNaughton, 11 November 1943, "Overseas Trip in 1943", Ralston Papers, NAC MG 27 HI BII, Vol.59.
  50. Granatstein Interviews, 21 May 1991, DHH.
  51. McNaughton War Diary, 6 March 1943.
  52. Swettenham, *McNaughton*, I: p.191.
  53. LH 2/M, Memorandum on McNaughton, 16/8/66, Liddell Hart Papers, LHCMA.
  54. McNaughton War Diary, 6 March 1943, Appex D.
  55. *Ibid.*
  56. General Sir Francis Alanbrooke, "Exercise Bumper, 27 September-3 October 1941: Comments by C-in-C Home Forces", Public Record Office, Kew, England [PROLWar Office (WO) 199/727.
  57. Hamilton, *Monty: Master of the Battlefield*, p.50. Montgomery had been utterly shocked at the level of training in Eighth Army when he assumed command before El Alamein.
  58. See William Ziegler, CRA 1 Canadian Infantry Division, interview, Granatstein Interviews, 23 October 1991, DHH.
  59. Alanbrooke Papers, 5/2/16.
  60. Liddell Hart Papers. And perhaps there is significant truth to Denis Whitaker's assertion that big exercises like "Spartan" were always chaotic because of the umpires. Granatstein Interviews, 19 March 1991, DHH.
  61. Brooke, "Exercise Bumper: Comments by C-in-C Home Forces."
  62. Paget, "Comments by C-in-C Home Forces," p. 13.
  63. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
  64. "Spartan R.E. Final Conference, Summary of Remarks by Chief Engineer Home Forces," NAC RG 24, Vol.10436, File 2120(031).
  65. Paget, "Comments by C-in-C Home Forces", pp.30, 54.
  66. Granatstein Interviews, 24 May 1991, DHH.
  67. English, *The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign*, p. 146.
  68. Alanbrooke Papers, "Notes for My Memoirs," 5/2/16, p.279.
  69. Alanbrooke Papers, 5/2/20.
  70. After "Bumper" he recorded that "I had discovered that Laurence Carr... had not got the required qualities for a higher commander, and started planning his relief." Brooke sought Lieutenant-General G.C Bucknall's relief from command of XXX Corps in Normandy and harshly criticized many other senior British commanders during the war.
  71. Alanbrooke Papers, 5/2/20.
  72. Montgomery to Trumbull Warren, 1 June 1942, Montgomery Papers, Ancillary Collection, Imperial War Museum, London.
  73. Stacey, *Six Years of War*, p. 250.
  74. Stacey, *A Date With History*, p.116. Swettenham reinforced this idea, claiming that if McNaughton had been "solely concerned with his own reputation" he would have "made sure that Crerar's well-trained corps was left as the only major Canadian formation in the exercise." *McNaughton*, II: p.274. Although this is somewhat difficult to accept, what is undeniable is that sponsorship, or the lack of it, played a key role in the fortunes of particular commanders during the war. George Patton was lucky to have George C Marshall in his corner and Montgomery was often shielded by Brooke. McNaughton had no one in his corner, not even General Kenneth Stuart, the Canadian Chief of the General Staff (CGS), nor James L. Ralston, the Minister of National Defence. Mackenzie King, although originally disposed to support McNaughton, quickly gave way to the combined arguments of Ralston, Stuart, Crerar, Paget and Brooke.

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