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Successful Command

Lieutenant-General Robert Moncel on Wartime Leaders

J.L. Granatstein

Robert Moncel was the youngest brigadier in Canadian history, promoted to that rank at age 27. Born in Montreal in 1917, he was a subaltern in the Victoria Rifles in Montreal when broke out, and he proceeded overseas in 1939 with the Royal Canadian Regiment. After several command and staff appointments, he led an armoured brigade with great success in 1944-45.

After the war, Moncel served at Army Headquarters, in the US and UK, and was successively Quartermaster General and Vice Chief of the Defence Staff. He left the Canadian Forces in 1966 at the time of unification. He died in 2007.

I met Moncel at a mess dinner at Camp Borden in 1960. A brash officer cadet, I asked him to get me access to the files of the Directorate of History at Army Headquarters for the B.A. thesis I was planning to write at the Royal Military College (RMC) on Canada and Peacekeeping. Amazingly, he did so, and I have been grateful to him ever since. When I interviewed him in 1991, three decades later, he was an impressive figure, intelligent, opinionated, precise. Those qualities, I think, show in his comments below.

This interview has been lightly edited. The original transcript of the interview, one of the many I

Abstract: Lieutenant-General Robert Moncel was the youngest brigadier in Canadian history and commanded the 4th Canadian Armoured Brigade in Northwest Europe from 1944-1945 with great success. This transcript of an interview conducted by J.L. Granatstein contains Moncel's views on a wide range of issues related to the Canadian army of the Second World War, especially his candid views of many senior commanders including Guy Simonds,

conducted for *The Generals: The Canadian Army's Senior Commanders in the Second World War*, is in my papers at the York University Archives. A copy of the full set of interviews has been deposited at the Directorate of History and Heritage, National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa.

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General Robert Moncel interview, Mahone Bay, NS, 6 October 1991

We began by talking about the Permanent Force. He was no admirer, remarking on the "miserable performance" of many PFers and Royal Military College graduates in the war. They had everything going for them technically, including

staff college, much more than the militia but a lot ended up after four years of war as captains or majors and as drunks. They were like the English, either very good or bloody awful. Of course, the Non-Permanent Active Militia (NPAM) wasn't much different with the good and the bad. He apologized for sounding a snob, but those NPAM (and RMC) officers who had gone to private schools and had responsibility as prefects and who joined good – i.e. city – NPAM regiments did well. They knew what responsibility was, they could take and give orders, and they had good minds – Bruce Matthews, for example. The NPAM officers from rural regiments were much less good and in many cases outsiders had to be brought in to run them. The RCRs, he said, stocked large numbers of these.

He mentioned the 12th Manitoba Dragoons that he was sent to whip into line. The commanding officer, J.S. McMahon, was Simonds' RMC classmate and the second-in-command was Gordon Churchill [later a Diefenbaker minister]. They had to be chopped, hadn't a clue, no trades training, etc. The squadron leaders were drunk in the afternoon. They had to go, and he got new officers and an RSM from the RCRs, created new badges and shoulder flashes, and broke the regiment into



Brigadier R.W. Moncel (right) with Colonel J.L. Ralston, the Canadian minister of national defence, October 1944.

training squadrons and worked them hard for 5 months. No one told him how to do this.

He agreed the NPAM generals at the onset of war were terrible, but there was no one else. Mind you, the PF had its problems too in 1939. He joined the RCRs where companies had a strength of 40 and had one light machine gun. The officers were drunks – he poured his company commander into bed every night. The RCR CO (Hodson) hated staff (staff college was “a forcing ground for shits”), and believed decorations or praise shouldn’t be offered. But they were soon weeded out. He said he had the RCR carrier platoon and a UK officer told him his men should be drawing trades pay. So he went to see Dan Spry, a lifelong friend, who was adjutant and asked to see the war establishment (WE). This shocked Spry and the CO because the WE was secret, they said. But eventually these regulars agreed that trades pay was permitted. Astonishing they’d not known this.

He took the carrier platoon to France in June 1940 and after the retreat was told by a Brit officer to destroy them. He flatly refused and

got them loaded on a ship as ballast after ordering his platoon sergeant to shoot the officer if necessary. They finally landed in Southampton to hear a band playing – for a tea dance. He was told to turn over his carriers to the general pool, refused, and was rescued by Boy Browning [General Sir Frederick Browning] whom he’d met on a course. When he got back to the RCR mess, two weeks after everyone else, the CO chased him out for looking scruffy.

How then did the PF produce a Simonds? He was just a baby in 1939, a captain, but he loved the business. He was Moncel’s idol, mentor and the only one of the whole bunch with talent, brains, guts. After the war, the government, frightened of him, treated him badly; indeed, the government was mean to all the generals postwar.

He met Simonds when he got sent to the first war staff course Simonds ran and he stood first in the course. Simonds was a lieutenant-colonel, dapper, smartly turned out, and knew what he was doing. He didn’t see him again for some time.

Moncel’s posting after staff college was as GSO 3 at Corps (where

he never saw McNaughton) which he hated and from which he was rescued by F.F. Worthington and made first a GSO 3 and then brigade major and finally GSO 1 of his division. Worthington was the kindest, nicest man, the most enthusiastic, and the most divorced from reality. He regularly proclaimed his brigade and eventually his division ready for action when it was nothing like it – no gunnery, no tradesmen. That was his weakness, an inability to see reality. Even though he understood armoured tactics and was the only one who believed in the tank, Moncel doubts he could have commanded in action: he’d have been at the front with his sword waving. He wanted to see blood on the tracks.

He remembered an exercise Worthington’s brigade had to put on for Montgomery. Worthington wouldn’t make a plan or let Moncel do up one. When the day arrived, he told Moncel to simply say “how would you proceed, Brigadier?” and turn it over to him. He blew it, made Monty restless and angry, and Worthington left in a huff. To Moncel, this was typical of the PF. He said Worthington and McNaughton got

on well because both liked gadgetry. McNaughton was fascinated by Worthington's workshop.

He remembered E.W. Sansom who was incompetent, and he recalled that Ernie read a book describing a desert corps commander who travelled with a truck full of cable so he could unroll the line and stay in contact wherever he was. Sansom decided to try this in the UK, got Fin Clark, his chief signals officer, to put the Corps' whole cable reserve on a truck and it was a disaster. In the UK the line got cut everywhere. The problem with him, as corps commander, was that he gave no direction. He told Moncel to produce a plan for a big exercise, and he did so; Sansom flipped through it and said it looked great. That was all. But he was fun in the mess and it was a party every night. Moncel said that he was asked to get Sansom drunk so he could be fired on those grounds. He refused. But Sansom was ultimately sacked anyhow. He and McNaughton lived in another world.

When Simonds took over the Corps things changed. Moncel was GSO 1 and Simonds gave him a plan he'd written out in long hand for

distribution. Moncel changed a few things and sent it out. When Simonds saw this he called him and reamed him out: "Don't you ever do that again." He had the palest blue eyes and looked like a hawk. He gave direction; he knew what he wanted, and the UK generals respected him which they didn't other Canadians.

Simonds had come from Italy to take the Corps and Moncel was the junior member in A Mess. Each morning at breakfast another staff officer was gone until finally only Moncel was left. Simonds smiled and said "you're staying." He brought in his own people from Italy and he was right to can the Corps staff he did. His people performed well.

He was great to work for. He knew what he wanted and he had confidence in his people to leave them alone to do their job. He knew they'd break their neck to carry out his wishes. Many were frightened of him, but not Moncel. He travelled with him at the front, saw him in all kinds of circumstances and they became good friends.

Simonds didn't like Charles Foulkes. When his 2nd Division was to stage an attack, Simonds was

just behind division HQ waiting for the scheduled attack to go in at 0600 hours. Simonds had risen at 0500 hours. The barrage was late (0620 hours) and Simonds said "I'm going over to relieve the Division commander." Moncel urged delay, it wouldn't help the battle. Simonds looked at him with his hawklike glare and agreed: "you owe me one." The battle was a disaster, like everything Foulkes touched. Foulkes' rise was, to Moncel, inexplicable. His staff was poor – he attracted poor officers. He said once Foulkes was cut off and one of Moncel's officers (when he had 4th Armoured Brigade) rescued him. Moncel couldn't forgive the officer for that.

Moncel talked about courage in battle. He said when he took over his brigade he visited his artillery regiment, commanded by an RMC grad. The second-in-command was at the gun lines and the CO was back with the transport. This happened again and finally the second-in-command said the CO wouldn't come forward. Moncel went to see him, pleaded, failed, and had to can him. The CO had run a good regiment in the UK, but he couldn't stand up to

Brigadier R.W. Moncel, commander of 4th Canadian Armoured Brigade, Tillburg, Netherlands, 19 March 1945.



action. Why? No way of predicting who does well and who doesn't. You were often wrong. Who'd have expected Fred Tilston or David Currie to get VCs?

He said that when George Kitching was canned it was because he'd been let down by his brigadiers. Brigadier E.L. Booth was brave and experienced but he put his HQ in three tanks during Operation Totalize and when he was killed there was no communication to 4th Division HQ. Kitching couldn't find out what was up, and the attack ground to a halt. The key was, as Simonds said, to have HQ in a safe place with good communications; then the CO could go forward while his HQ stayed in touch. It took five days before Moncel learned he was to take over Booth's brigade.

He said he'd once before been told he was to be promoted. Just before D-Day, Brigadier R.A. Wyman blabbed the plans and Monty was furious and wanted him canned. Moncel was tapped for the job, but Simonds changed his mind, saying it was wrong to change commanders then. Wyman took the brigade in and got wounded before he could be relieved.

Totalize was Simonds' plan. Moncel didn't think he had asked too much of green regiments. It would have worked as the troops (Ned Amy, he mentioned) got on their objectives but then no orders came through. The brigadiers were inexperienced. Possibly Simonds ought to have taken that into account.

Simonds had charisma and the troops saw it. Perhaps he aped Monty too much with his black beret, and that helped make some hate him. The Brits put up with idiosyncrasy better than Canadians. Still he was charming and great fun, a challenge at all times. He recalled after the war at a Cabinet Defence Committee, Simonds was trying to get the Canadian Guards authorized and one minister queried this. Simonds said, "when the mobs

storm Parliament Hill, you will be glad to have two loyal battalions."

He talked about how a commander can't believe a CO who says the men are tired. Too often it was the commander who was tired. He recalled Simonds being told troops were "pinned to the ground" and on going forward found the men lying in the sun. He fired all the commanders. They ought to have been going forward to see things themselves. A brigadier should go down to company level to see what was up. Moreover, good brigadiers had gone to staff college and had a sense of inter-arm cooperation and of the resources available. He recalled sitting in on a brigadier's Orders Group when, on being offered extra artillery and armour support, the brigadier refused. The attack was a disaster and 200 died. Officers got tired and stopped caring. They ought to have been relieved – with honour.

The problem wasn't the men – they were superb. It was the officers. Still by the end of the war the First Canadian Army was superb. It could move instantly, it was magnificent, and it had taken five years to build it. His brigade was superb, tough and efficient. A bad brigadier could lose in a day what Moncel's brigade lost in all of Northwest Europe – 350 killed. The Germans, he added, were a ragtag lot, though their good units were superb. And the Canadians had such equipment in such quantity it was extravagant to the point of immorality.

He wasn't a great admirer of Chris Vokes who ended the war as his division commander (though they had riotous times postwar and were friends). He knew nil about armour and wasn't a happy camper in Northwest Europe. He only rarely came to see Moncel's brigade (2-3 times) and left him on his own. This was because the orders came from Corps and the division commanders had little to do. He did recall one day Vokes came to his HQ when

they were being shelled and Vokes jumped into a trench with his tinhat on, while Moncel's officers walked around. One kept saluting Vokes every time he passed his trench. (Moncel had laid down that staff officers wore caps, not tin hats. He remembered being in a doorway with Harry Foster at Caen under fire when two privates jumped in for shelter. "You're a general?" "Yes." "You can do what you want?" "Yes." "Well, if I was a general I'd get the hell out of here.") Vokes ran his occupation force like a warlord.

He saw little of Harry Crerar. He was a gent with a lovely wife, who liked to have RMC boys around (he mentioned Bill Anderson especially, saying it was terrible that he wasn't allowed to command a unit in action but was kept at Army HQ.)

George Pearkes, he said, was like Worthington who'd have had his sword in hand in the attack. He actually travelled with a trumpeter and once introduced Mrs. Churchill as Mrs. Attlee. His brains had been blown out in World War I.

Dan Spry, he said, recovered from being canned and did well. Rod Keller left him cold – like Vokes too much blood and guts.

To him Ottawa wasn't the enemy; Canadian Military HQ was, though this ceased once they got into action.

He also said that he had no sense that reinforcements were short. Not in armoured regiments and not in his motorized infantry.

J.L. Granatstein has received the Order of Canada and the Pierre Berton Award, among other distinctions. He is the former director and CEO of the Canadian War Museum.