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FEATURE

Montgomery, Crerar and the Possibility of Canadian Military Independence, 1944

J. L. GRANATSTEIN

Abstract: Bernard Montgomery and Harry Crerar were not friends, and their relationship grew worse in September 1944 when Crerar skipped a meeting at Montgomery's headquarters to attend a commemorative service at Dieppe. A furious Montgomery indicated that he wanted to sack Crerar, and the Canadian responded that he would consult his government. Monty quickly realized he could not easily get rid of the First Canadian Army commander, but Crerar, fuming, asked Canadian Military Headquarters to study how to secure more independence for his army. The course of the war by late 1944 eventually rendered this idea moot, but it was nonetheless an important, if hitherto unnoticed moment, in Canada's military history.

BERNARD MONTGOMERY AND HARRY CRERAR were never close. The British military hero, the Commander in Chief of 21st Army Group, and the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of First Canadian Army from March 1944 clashed in the field almost from the moment the Canadian's headquarters went operational in Normandy on 23 July 1944. Though Montgomery had seemed to approve of Crerar in training exercises in England, he had formed a distinctly negative view of him in Italy where Crerar briefly commanded I Canadian Corps. To Montgomery, the only Canadian officer capable of higher command was Guy Simonds. Crerar and Simonds, late in 1943 commanding the 5th Canadian Armoured Division in Italy, sparred bitterly; so much so that Crerar thought his subordinate mentally ill and told Montgomery so. That did not sit well with the

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Simonds, Montgomery and Crerar in February 1945. [LAC 4002428]

then-commander of the Eighth Army who recognised a battle of egos when he saw one.¹

By the time Crerar had been in Normandy for a month, Montgomery was unhappy with what he perceived as the lack of drive in Crerar's conduct of operations. The Field Marshal concluded that Simonds, then leading II Canadian Corps in the vicious fighting south of Caen, ought to be commanding First Canadian Army.

For Montgomery, the breaking point with Crerar came on 3 September. He summoned the Canadian to an important meeting at his Tactical Headquarters to discuss his plans for Operation Market Garden, the airborne and ground assault that aimed to secure key bridges over the Rhine. Attending were the senior commanders of

¹ The Crerar-Simonds spat involved Crerar sending an officer to take measurements of Simonds' caravan without the latter's permission. This infuriated Simonds and led to sharp exchanges. See J.L. Granatstein, *The Generals: The Canadian Army's Senior Commanders in the Second World War* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1993), 161-62.

21st Army Group, 12th US Army Group and the First US Army. Apparently under the impression—the wrong impression—that the meeting was not immediately important, Crerar opted instead to attend the commemorative service at Dieppe, the site of the August 1942 debacle that had wiped out much of 2nd Canadian Division's infantry. Crerar claimed that he had not received a message stating that it was “essential” he attend Monty's briefing, blaming signals problems. This was untrue; the message had been received but Crerar had requested that it not be passed to him.² As a result, the eventual meeting between the Field Marshal and the General later that day was extremely testy, with Monty chewing out Crerar and declaring that their “ways must part.” Crerar protested that he had good reason—indeed 800 reasons, the number of Canadian dead at Dieppe—to miss the meeting.³

Montgomery was furious nonetheless. He “intimated that he was not interested in my explanation,” Crerar wrote the next day to General Kenneth Stuart, the Chief of Staff at Canadian Military Headquarters (CMHQ) in England. “[T]he Canadian aspect of the Dieppe ceremonial was of no importance compared to getting on with the war.” Montgomery inferred that he would get Crerar replaced, but the Canadian, standing on his rights as a national commander, replied “that I assumed he would at once take this up through higher channels and that, I, in turn, would at once report the situation to my Government.”⁴

The thought that he might become embroiled in a dispute with Ottawa apparently led Montgomery to back off. On 7 September, the Field Marshal, pressed by Lieutenant-Colonel (Lt.-Col.) Trumball Warren, his Canadian personal assistant, apologised to Crerar: “I am sorry I was a bit rude the other day, and somewhat outspoken. I was annoyed that no one [from First Canadian Army] came to a very

² Paul Dickson, *A Thoroughly Canadian General: A Biography of General H.D.G. Crerar* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 330. Dickson's is the best account of this incident.

³ Dickson, *A Thoroughly Canadian General*, 333.

⁴ As quoted in C.P. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, Vol. III: *The Operations in North-West Europe* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1960), 305; and J.L. Granatstein, *The Best Little Army in the World: The Canadians in Northwest Europe* (Toronto: Harper Perennial, 2015), 132-33.

important conference. But forget about it—and let us get on with the war. It was my fault.”⁵

Neither man would forget about it, however. Long after the war, Montgomery wrote to Warren that Crerar had been unfit to command an army: “What I suffered from that man!”⁶ The Field Marshal, as one of his staff officers later observed, “was astonishing in his relationship with all the Dominion troops. He ordered them around like British troops, ignoring the devolution of the British Empire...he was completely out of date.”⁷

Crerar, however, was never out of date in his understanding of the constitutional niceties. He and Stuart had raised the constitutional and legal issues with Montgomery before and after D-Day, arguing strenuously that Crerar “was bound to be responsible to the Canadian Government, in the last resort, for the operational employment of all Canadian troops in 21 Army Group.” Montgomery on 19 June had indicated that he understood, professing satisfaction that the “air was properly cleared.”⁸

Crerar was an emotional man with a fierce temper that he struggled to control and he was as unhappy with Montgomery as Monty was with him. He left his 3 September meeting with the Field Marshal in a rage. “I’ve never seen a chap so mad,” Lt.-Col. Warren recalled when Crerar left Monty’s caravan. “That guy is not going to get away with that,” Crerar fumed.⁹

The most nationalistic of Canadian commanders was not Harry Crerar. That accolade belonged to General Andrew McNaughton, who had led Canadian troops in England from 1939 until late 1943, when he was removed from command of First Canadian Army. To McNaughton, who had watched General Sir Arthur Currie sometimes wrestle with his military superiors about control of the Canadian Corps, “the acid test of sovereignty,” he told then Major Charles

⁵ As quoted in Dickson, *A Thoroughly Canadian General*, 335.

⁶ As quoted in Granatstein, *Best Little Army*, 135.

⁷ As quoted in Granatstein, *The Generals*, 109.

⁸ As quoted in Granatstein, *The Generals*, 109. Montgomery on 18 May 1944 talked with Prime Minister Mackenzie King about his views on the legalities surrounding command of Canadian troops in the field. See, W.L.M. King Diary, f. 502ff, Library and Archives Canada.

⁹ As quoted in Dickson, *A Thoroughly Canadian General*, 335. See also the Trumbull Warren interview in J.L. Granatstein, *The Weight of Command: Voices of Canada’s Second World War Generals and Those Who Knew Them* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016), 209-12.

Stacey at their first meeting in January 1941, “is the control of the armed forces.”¹⁰ The British resented this attitude, clearly feeling that the war often came second to McNaughton’s insistence on the niceties of Canadian sovereignty. General Sir Alan Brooke, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (and in the Great War a staff officer at the Canadian Corps headquarters), wrote in his diary in 1941 that McNaughton “loved to surround the employment of his Corps with a network of ‘Convention,’ ‘Charters,’ and ‘Constitution’ which would have rendered the employment of Canadian troops even more difficult than that of Allies.”¹¹

Crerar was somewhat less punctilious than McNaughton, but he was just as much a stickler on the legalities of his and his nation’s position and very conscious of his duties as the Senior Combatant Officer, responsible to the government of Canada for his men. He was also concerned with his own position, naturally enough, worried that Montgomery’s complaints could have resulted in his removal. It was not out of character for Crerar, a tough man when he had to be, to turn a threat to his command of the Army into a constitutional issue. And he did so when he wrote on 5 September to Stuart to urge that action should be taken to alter the position of Canadian troops from “in combination” with British forces to “serving together.” As defined by the Visiting Forces Acts (British Commonwealth) of 1933, troops serving together were effectively independent. Troops in combination, however, were under unified command and in Northwest Europe for the First Canadian Army that meant British command.¹²

Aware of the importance of the 1933 Act and of his right to consult his government, as Montgomery should have been, Crerar seized on this at the meeting on 3 September. Montgomery soon retreated from his threat to get Crerar sacked. But only if the Canadians were “serving together” with the British, as Crerar apparently desired, could First Canadian Army secure an appropriate degree of independence, enough to secure some freedom of action.¹³

¹⁰ As quoted in C.P. Stacey, “Canadian Leaders of the Second World War,” *Canadian Historical Review* 66, 1 (March 1985): 67.

¹¹ As quoted in Granatstein, *The Generals*, 67.

¹² C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada 1939-45* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1970), 210-13.

¹³ Based on a message from Crerar to Stuart, 5 September 1944, quoted in Dickson, *A Thoroughly Canadian General*, 335.

Serving under General Stuart at CMHQ was the Judge Advocate General (JAG), Major-General Price Montague, a distinguished Winnipeg jurist and militia officer soon to replace Stuart as Chief of Staff at CMHQ in the rank of lieutenant-general. On his JAG staff was Lt.-Col. George Tritschler, another prominent Winnipeg lawyer and infantryman who had served in Italy and at First Canadian Army headquarters.¹⁴

Many years after the war, Tritschler borrowed Charles Stacey's masterful official history *Arms, Men and Governments* from his friend Major-General Elliott Rodger who had been Simonds' Chief of Staff at II Canadian Corps and Tritschler returned the book with a brief hand-written note:

I wonder if Stacey was aware of Crerar's [*sic*] proposal to have 'his' army freed from 21 Army Group and to enjoy the same autonomy which the Yanks had from Monty. This was before the Ardennes crisis [the German surprise attack in mid-December 1944] which restored the Field Marshal's prestige and Eisenhower placed the First U.S. Army as well as the Ninth under Monty's command and give him control of all Allied ground operations on the Northern Flank of the German penetration. It was at this stage that our brains trust felt a little sheepish and I gave up the embarrassing file of correspondence.¹⁵

The 21st Army Group ordinarily had only the Canadians and Second British Army under command and if Crerar's desire to free First Canadian Army had been pressed, Montgomery would have had very little to control.

Crerar had always been a consummate bureaucrat, much more adept at winning a war of memoranda than commanding a large army in action. Montgomery may have been the master of the battlefield,

¹⁴ "Memorable Manitobans: George Eric Tritschler (1901-1993)," *Manitoba Historical Society*, last edited 1 February 2020. http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/people/tritschler_ge.shtml. Tritschler would become the Chief Justice of the Manitoba Court of Appeal from 1962 to 1973.

¹⁵ Tritschler to Major-General Elliot Rodger, 8.6.81, attached to General Elliot Rodger, letter to author, 12 November 2001. Stacey probably did not see Tritschler's file. In *Arms, Men and Governments*, he writes: "The right to withdraw forces from combination...remained academic and theoretical...never exercised...never needed" (Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments*, 222). That was correct, but Crerar seemed prepared to press for change. If Stacey had known of Crerar's instruction to General Stuart, he would surely have discussed it.

but Crerar's proposal was potentially a kill shot in a bureaucratic war. His directive could have threatened Montgomery's weakened position in the alliance's high command in the early autumn of 1944. There had been much harshly negative American military and media comment directed at Montgomery's operations around Caen and in closing the trap on the Germans fleeing Normandy in mid-August (much of that griping directed at the Canadians' performance), at the failure of Market Garden in late September and at the missed opportunities and subsequent delays in opening Antwerp to shipping. If word leaked out that the Canadians were now so unhappy with Montgomery that they were seeking ways to be liberated from his command, this would have had serious repercussions at General Dwight Eisenhower's Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Force in France and in London at the War Office.

Still, Crerar's action in seeking to safeguard his own position and secure more autonomy would also have caused the utmost consternation in Ottawa. Montgomery was still widely hailed as the Commonwealth's greatest general, an attitude held in Canada and within the army, and the wartime Dominion was very pro-British. If Montgomery was threatened by Crerar's nationalism, so too was Crerar at risk because of Canadian wartime Anglophilia and the political crisis this military and legal spat would certainly have sparked in Parliament and the media. Prime Minister Mackenzie King, always preferring compromise to conflict, would not have been pleased.

What seems beyond doubt is that Crerar's troubles with Montgomery were extremely stressful and his physical condition worsened through that difficult September. His biographer observes that "his powers of decision slipped markedly" during this period and Crerar knew all too well that Montgomery wanted to replace him with Guy Simonds.¹⁶ Finally on 26 September, he told Montgomery that he was ill with dysentery, anemia and stomach problems and needed to go to England for medical assessment and treatment.

Despite his concerns for his own position and grudgingly aware that there was no one else able to replace him, Crerar recommended that Simonds become acting General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of First Canadian Army. Montgomery quickly agreed, finally—if temporarily—securing the commander he wanted for First Canadian Army. Simonds would fight a brilliant, gruelling battle to clear the

¹⁶ Dickson, *A Thoroughly Canadian General*, 321.

Scheldt estuary and at last allow merchant ships to reach Antwerp, raising him even higher in Montgomery's eyes. And when Crerar was ready to return from England to the Continent in late October, the Field Marshal tried to prevent this, though all he could achieve was to delay Crerar's resumption of command to 7 November. Crerar certainly knew of Montgomery's efforts to get rid of him once and for all.¹⁷

Nonetheless, Crerar at root was a cautious, sensible man, aware that Canada was only a junior partner in a vast coalition. His nation was deeply committed to the war, he understood the limitations on Canada's—and his—freedom of action and he did not want to disrupt the conduct of the war unless such action was absolutely necessary. After his resumption of command, his relations with Montgomery became correct but cool and there were no further direct confrontations. Crerar, his position now secure, wisely did not press his arguments for a change in the legal status of Canadian troops.

As Colonel Tritschler noted, by the beginning of 1945 events in the field seemed to make Crerar's search for more military independence somewhat "embarrassing." Crerar's concerns in September for his own position must have been obvious and no one at CMHQ seemed to want to press efforts for military independence too hard. More than a half-century later, General Rodger's comment seems appropriate: "I find it hard to believe that 'they' were seriously considering having First Canadian Army fighting as a third arm of Eisenhower's command instead of the British (mainly) 21 Army Group."¹⁸



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J.L. Granatstein served in the Canadian Army then taught Canadian history for thirty years. He was Director and CEO of the Canadian War Museum, and writes on Canadian military history, politics, foreign and defence policy, and public policy. Among his many publications are *The Generals*, *Canada's Army*, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Military History*, and *The Greatest Victory: Canada's Hundred Days, 1918*.

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¹⁷ Dickson, *A Thoroughly Canadian General*, 358-59.

¹⁸ Rodger to author, letter, 12 November 2001. See also the Rodger interview in Granatstein, *Weight of Command*, 140-44.