The Old Boy Networks
Lieutenant-General William A.B. Anderson
Interview, Ottawa 21 May 1991

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Abstract: William Anderson was a Permanent Force artilleryman who held staff appointments in the overseas army through much of the Second World War. This transcript of an interview conducted by J.L. Granatstein in 1991 features Anderson’s thoughtful and “non-judgmental” insights concerning many senior officers, including Generals H.D.G. Crerar and G.G. Simonds, both of whom he served during the campaign in Northwest Europe.


I interviewed General Anderson at his home in Ottawa as part of the research for my book The Generals: The Canadian Army’s Senior Commanders in the Second World War, published in 1993. I knew him slightly because he had been the commandant at the Royal Military College in 1960–1961, my last year there.

Anderson’s interview was, I thought then and still, superb for its clear assessments and its frank, non-judgmental tone. He was particularly good in assessing Guy Simonds and Harry Crerar, the
two key commanders he watched in action and served as a staff officer. Anderson was a fine officer, but he recognized that his rise during the war had been attributable to those he knew as much as what he knew. Still, his talents as a staff officer were such that he never had the opportunity to command in the field which must have bothered him.

After VE Day, Anderson went back to Canada to serve in the Pacific Force as Deputy Commander Royal Artillery, but Japan surrendered before the troops could be deployed. Promoted Colonel in 1946 – age 31 – he served in Canada, commanded the brigade in NATO and was Commandant of RMC as a brigadier, served as Adjutant-General, and in 1966, promoted to Lieutenant-General, he led Mobile Command. Anderson retired from the Canadian Forces in 1969, joined the Ontario public service at a senior level, and died in 2000.

This interview has been lightly edited. The original is in my papers at the York University Archives and a copy of the interview, along with all those I did for the book, is held at the Directorate of History and Heritage at National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa.

We began with Guy Simonds. He took command of a field regiment in 1940, after the unit (Ham Roberts') had returned from France only with its guns (all other equipment left behind) and with its morale bruised. Those who'd been envious of Simonds had said he was a staff man and couldn't command, but he got the regiment in shape, gave it a great electric jolt. He used traditional methods (inter-battery competitions, etc.), but it worked.

Anderson had first met him during his RMC 3rd year summer training (1935) when he was at Petawawa as a Temporary 2nd Lieutenant, assigned to Capt. Simonds as a gunnery instructor. Simonds was just back from the Gunnery Staff Course in the U.K. Anderson spent the summer carrying papers and making notes for him, his bumboy in effect. He learned more about how to teach watching him. He wasn't intolerant of the militia, but was patient and didn't frighten them. He was a dandy, but so articulate. And he was good to Anderson and didn't scare the pants off him. He never had qualms about chatting with Simonds, and Simonds was pleased that Battalion Sergeant-Major [the top cadet position at RMC]
Anderson chose the artillery. Anderson said Simonds wasn’t nice to him just because his father was a general. And if they met at the Park Lane in London during the war, they’d go to a show together.

In 1938, just back from Camberley, Simonds was posted to RMC. He was “super snap”, he’d been singled out, and everyone knew it. Indeed when Anderson joined A Battery, RCHA at Kingston, all the wos and ncos and even some gunners remembered Simonds from the 1920s. They sang his praises, called him the Count, and thought he was a good horseman, a good regimental officer. They respected his ability and professionalism. By the time the war came, Anderson had great admiration for him.

Moreover, Simonds was a good technical gunner. He could teach all aspects of gunnery, though it was true he never handled guns in action. He didn’t study gunnery, Anderson said, because he didn’t need to; nor did he sit around the mess wasting time.

We then switched to more general subjects. The time for promotion from Lieutenant to Captain in the Permanent Force was 8 years – but you could pass the exams sooner – Anderson did after 2 years. The PF was very unprofessional, play soldiering, full of old officers (but also some 1920s and 1930s duds). But Harry Crerar wasn’t like that – he was thoroughly professional, oriented to the
future, and very experienced. E.W. Sansom too had a good mind and was a real student of his profession; however, he was a bit too much of a partyer to survive the whole course. E.L.M. Burns too was serious, very bright, dedicated.

Others were less good. Ham Roberts, who Anderson had real affection for, was his battery commander. He’d married money, didn’t hang around the mess, and the men adored him because he could sing “Old Man River” better than Paul Robeson. He was the idol of battery smokers. His battery won the inter-battery competitions and he was no weak link. But he didn’t over-exert himself, didn’t get to Staff College, and didn’t do Gunnery Staff Courses in the U.K.

George Pearkes he knew from pre-RMC days, and Pearkes called him “Billy” from the age of 13. As GSO 1 at RMC, Pearkes was a bit away from cadets and ran the militia staff course, promotion exams, staff college entrance exams, etc. He next saw him when he was doing the practical portion of the Lieutenant-Captain exams at Petawawa when Pearkes came out from Ottawa to watch the syndicates. At the end he gave a splendid pep talk off the cuff on what young officers should do when the shooting started. There was nothing innovative in what he said, but he said all the right things. When he saw Pearkes next he had 1st Division and Anderson was on some job that took him to his HQ. Pearkes had organized a volleyball game on the lawn and he dragged “Billy” in – a nice easy touch. He then saw little of him until 1960 when Pearkes as Defence minister named him to be RMC commandant.

The RMC old boy net never crossed Anderson’s mind and he doesn’t believe in it. Simonds certainly didn’t play it, nor Crerar. For every ex-cadet like J.V. Young who was brought in at the top, there must have been five non-RMCers. Still, though he had no control over who was posted to his regiment, he was happy if he got ex-cadets. What did RMC then do? Prewar it had provided the skills that had helped mobilize the militia. For example, the Princess of Wales Own Rifles in Kingston was commanded by Anderson’s father-in-law and had Ben Cunningham as its Adjutant. He was an ex-cadet, a lawyer, and likely the only ex-cadet in the regiment. When the PWOR were mobilized, the adjutant was critical; if they were posted somewhere, the Adjutant would do a reconnaissance and see who he knew, using the RMC link or his legal links. This is networking and proper, knowing each other and having instant mutual respect. (Anderson noted that Simonds fired Cunningham as a brigadier in Normandy.
Simonds told Crerar he was doing this and, although Crerar might have stopped this at cost of a war with Simonds, he didn’t; he did interview Cunningham whom he had known in Kingston. Crerar fixed it for him to become RMC Commandant.

Keller: he doubted that Simonds would have admired him. But why did he not fire him in Normandy? First, he was on the hot seat in his biggest battle. He had to satisfy General Montgomery he could run II Canadian Corps and the brass got twitchy if an advance was held up. The relationship between Simonds and Montgomery was still too green for him to feel confident about firing a division GOC. Perhaps, Anderson suggested, the PF old boy net was more powerful than the RMC net—thus it might have been easier to fire George Kitching or Cunningham than Keller.

The militia/PF tension, he said, was very real. There was little mutual respect in 1939 though this diffused over six years of war. The PF culture was pretty strong, and some like Stanley Todd [Commander Royal Artillery, 3rd Division] were aware they’d got where they did without PF help. Also there was a gunners’ network, and there was no rivalry in the artillery over different badges (as in infantry). Still, he remembered the unpleasantness of hearing people talk in the Petawawa mess about “goddamn PF know it alls.”

Why did some rise? The recipe for not rising was to do a poor job. Those who “completed staff action” and left no loose ends and were dependable rose. Remember, the army overseas grew out of all recognition in 2-1/2 years and hands on control from the top was impossible. What you knew was the key but who you knew also had a lot to do with it. Anderson cited his own case: he was Adjutant of a militia artillery regiment in lst Division and the Commander Royal Artillery was J.C. Stewart. Anderson had good reports and his Commanding Officer liked him, so when a captain was needed at Division HQ, Stewart picked him. Then he was picked for Camberley War Staff Course (at the same time as Ted Beament).

General Price Montague and Canadian Military Headquarters: Anderson served there 3 times. He worked for Maurice Pope on General McNaughton’s main submission to Ottawa on creation of the Army (and they completely forgot to include a tank brigade!). He didn’t deal with Montague on this important question at all. A militia officer, Montague had Defence Minister J.L. Ralston’s confidence that he wasn’t in the PF’s pocket; and if the head of CMHQ could possibly not be in McNaughton’s pocket, then Montague was
the man. Montague roamed the halls like a cricket, calling people “boy” in a cheery way. He’d poke his head into offices.

Harry Crerar as acting Corps commander and Senior Combatant Officer had a tiny staff – 1 staff officer and 2 clerks, and Anderson was the officer to the SCO. Crerar was conscious of the fact Montague was junior to him, but he was also aware of the need not to bypass or short-circuit him. So if he got an “eyes only” message from Ralston or the Chief of the General Staff in Ottawa, he’d go out of his way to discuss it with Montague. Crerar was very savvy – he knew Ralston would talk a lot with Montague whenever he came to the U.K. and he didn’t want Montague to criticize him.

Anderson only knew Crerar to say hello pre-war. But in 1939–40, Crerar was around Aldershot a lot and his daughter and her husband shared billets with Anderson and his wife. Crerar replaced Anderson’s uncle as CGS (Major-General T.V. Anderson), and he was a good choice. He’d served at the War Office, at RMC, he’d set up CMHQ, etc. Then to everyone’s great surprise, he ceased to be CGS and took command of 2nd Division briefly and then the Corps. Anderson was his first Personal Assistant. Crerar had never had battledress on, and Anderson could never see him in a field command role. He saw him each day with the wireless traffic from Ottawa, and here Crerar was at home.

McNaughton, on the other hand, had an aura about him, a flamboyance without trying for it, and a great press build-up. He’d come into any group and liven it up; he was “bright as all Hell”. In France in 1940, where he’d have been division GOC, there were no concerns about him. There were no brooding feelings about him until 1942–3 and the British were first to worry. The exercises put him in difficulty, as they had for Generals Sansom and F.F. Worthington. And there was the feeling that all Great War people were has-beens.

C rerar as Army commander: Army was not a battlefield fighting organization in Northwest Europe. Division GOCs were apt to carry brigadiers with them while playing with battalions; so too did Monty, without insulting Crerar or General Miles Dempsey, carry corps along. Defeating the enemy was a corps/division/Monty job. What role then did Crerar’s Army HQ have? 1. It coordinated air support for its corps. Simonds or Charles Foulkes told Crerar what they needed, use of air was worked with 84 [Group, Second] Tactical Air Force (whose HQ was co-located with Army HQ). 2. It handled logistics. The corps and divisions were supposed to be fast and flexible, and the vast tonnages
needed depended on trucks controlled by Army. In effect Crerar had a staff officer role as Army commander. He drove around and visited, showed the flag, and didn’t attempt to influence the battle. Certainly he wouldn’t second guess Simonds (who was inclined to be critical of the way Crerar ran Army). Crerar realized his lack of influence, his Orders Groups were infrequent. If Monty wanted something, Crerar would get hold of Churchill Mann, the Chief of Staff, Ted Beament, the Brigadier, General Staff, and Anderson, the gso1, his key staff officers, and then Anderson would send a quick signal to the corps to re-jiggle. At a company level things happened fast; at division less so; at corps slowly; at army glacially.

When a big show was on, like the Scheldt, supplies poured in and the heat was on. Monty would call an Orders Group. At Army, there’d be feverish staff activity by Mann and A.E. Walford, the Deputy Adjutant and Quartermaster General, putting the Army plan together, and even here Crerar hung back, confident the staff would do the job.

Walcheren was different. Simonds had a bee in his bonnet on how to bomb the dykes so as to create new beaches on which to land. He kept pleading his case, but Army didn’t believe in it, thinking it too clever by half. But when Crerar got ill (this came as a bolt from the blue for the staff) and Simonds took over as acting Army commander, he galvanized the staff. Mann was nervous as a cricket – he’d never worked for someone like Simonds before. Beament was as usual imperturbable. Simonds said he’d bomb and it was his job to get the raf through the top brass channels. He did and it worked. Unfortunately, the weather didn’t cooperate and the attack was delayed while tension built. Finally, Simonds, after agonizing, sent in the assault. This was an Army battle with Simonds in charge – but this was because it was tri-service. Still, things were clear whereas before they didn’t have to be. Simonds was a commander in the classic mould – he made the plan, the staff had to make it work, and his job was to see that what he wanted was done. When Crerar returned, things also returned to normal.

The Reichswald was First Canadian Army’s golden moment with a huge force under control. But what did Army contribute? It was Monty’s operation – he got U.S. troops, he made the plan, and Army’s job was just detailed staff work. If Simonds had been there things would have been different: Monty might have given him more independence.
Nonetheless, Crerar was the right man for the job. He spoke for Canada very effectively even if he wasn’t the best field commander. He had a strong sense of the proper relationship to the British Army and his Great War experience told him how important it was for Canadians to stay together and be distinctively Canadian. And he was smoother than McNaughton, more civilized in achieving this. Every time he had a problem, one part of his mind asked, “how will this look in the history books?” He was also very conscious of his Senior Combatant Officer hat.

For all his Britishness, however, Simonds was also a nationalist, and it wouldn’t have been much different with him. He would have worked well with Monty, but he’d have had little time for politics.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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.