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Stephen Brooks, ed. *Montgomery and the Battle of Normandy: A Selection from the Diaries, Correspondence and Other Papers of Field Marshal the Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, January to August 1944.* Army Records Society, 27. Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2008. xvi + 384 pp. $32.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7509-5123-4.

Reviewed by James V. Koch (Old Dominion University)

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Bernard Montgomery, History (Re)writer

The stated goal of *Montgomery and the Battle of Normandy* is to "bring together the most important Bernard Montgomery documents for the period 1 January to 20 August 1944, reproduce each of the chosen documents in full and arrange them in a straightforward chronological order" (p. x). It is fair to say this volume achieves this goal, even though a batch of Montgomery documents already reproduced in full in other volumes was not included here.

The precise selection of a much larger set of available documents (the diaries, letters, and speeches of Montgomery) that appear here is the result of culling and evaluation by Stephen Brooks, who previously performed a similar task for Montgomery's North African papers. Brooks provides some evaluative commentary relating to the documents (primarily in footnotes) and often guides readers to other sources on issues of dispute that arise. Overall, his treatment of "Monty" is gentle and, in contrast to recent histories of the Normandy campaign, he generally resists skewering Montgomery's interpretation of events.

On occasion, he lets Montgomery off the hook rather easily in his commentary in the 650 valuable footnotes. Illustrations include British failures to take Caen early on and Monty's inability to close the Falaise gap in August 1944. Nevertheless, it would be unfair to conclude that this collection of 211 Montgomery documents is a view of Montgomery through rose-colored glasses. For example, although Brooks opines that "the documents show Montgomery as a brilliant communicator," he also catalogs Montgomery's many spats with a wide variety of military and political figures (p. 2).

Six generalizations emerge from these documents. First, Montgomery was a skillful, meticulous, determined organizer who was very good at organizing, mounting, supporting, and operating an army, even if subsequently he was not always the optimal decision maker in combat conditions. Second, Montgomery, when he wished to be, could be both charming and charismatic and evinced the ability to inspire confidence and increase morale among his charges. Third, an egotist, Montgomery was confident he possessed distinctive, superior knowledge and understanding of the military, how wars should be fought, and, in particular, how to defeat the Germans. He regarded the defeat of the Germans in Normandy as evidence of this. Fourth, Montgomery seldom shied away from the opportunity to criticize or denigrate all but a few other military leaders and political figures. Fifth, his scathing comments about his military colleagues of every nationality betray either a brimming self-confidence of Pattonesque magnitude, or a lurking inferiority complex that motivated him to attempt to cut down numerous contemporaries. Montgomery frequently was unable to admit his own errors or shortcomings. Finally, Montgomery's diary appears to have been written with an eye to postwar historical analysis. Montgomery seems to have deliberately shaded his diary comments, and perhaps even revised his views on matters with future historians in mind. When "facts" did not fit his desired narrative, he often revised his story, and soon claimed that the new version was what he had predicted all along.

Montgomery's consistent criticism of nearly every

other military and political leader stands out in these documents. At the top, he laid wood to individuals such as Winston Churchill, Charles de Gaulle, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory, Arthur Tedder, Arthur Coningham, Bernard Law Alexander, and Henry Crerar. Churchill is painted as an interfering pain-in-the-neck. General de Gaulle, admittedly a difficult figure, struck Montgomery as an individual who was "a poor fish and gives out no inspiration" (p. 144). Montgomery portrayed Eisenhower as a loud, though amiable individual of limited talent whose "ignorance as to how to run a war is absolute and complete" (p. 298).

Air Chief Marshall Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory, air commander for the Normandy invasion, "is definitely above his ceiling in his present job and is not good enough for the job we are on" (p. 58). Monty added that Leigh-Mallory was "a gutless bugger" and summarized, "I have no use for him" (p. 135). Of Air Marshall Arthur Tedder, the deputy commander of the entire invasion force, Montgomery opined, "he is very weak" (p. 167).

Montgomery's most revealing and pungent comments usually appear in his personal letters, which often were dispatched to Alan Brooke, chief of the Imperial General Staff. For example, Montgomery told Brooke that Air Marshall Sir Arthur Coningham, who was in charge of tactical air support for the invasion, is "a bad man, not genuine, and terribly jealous" (p. 166). General Harold Alexander, who commanded the British 15th Army Group in Italy and who had originally been proposed by Eisenhower to lead all Normandy invasion forces, was castigated by Monty as "definitely third class as a high commander. It will be interesting to see when the P.M., and others, discover that Alexander is no good" (p. 104). Apparently they did not come to that realization, since Alexander was made a field marshall in 1945 and elevated to a peerage in 1946.

Of General Henry Crerar, the senior Canadian commander, Montgomery complained, "I fear very much that Harry Crerar will be quite unfit to command any Army.... He is very prosy and stodgy, and he is very definitely not a commander" (p. 185). Crerar, averred Monty, "is a very poor soldier, and has much to learn" (p. 244). It is hardly an accident that Antony Beevor, the most recent major historian of the Normandy battle, observes, "Senior Canadian officers detected a supercilious attitude toward them."[1] Such an attitude appears to have come naturally to Montgomery.

On occasions, Montgomery's arrows were aimed at larger groups such as the British War Office, where Monty lamented that "there is no one in the War Office who is a really good soldier" (p. 94). In this vein, he decided (correctly) that he had to recast the entire Normandy invasion plan after he took command of the invasion ground forces in January 1944. In a February 24, 1944 letter to Admiral Louis Montbatten, Monty lamented, "Here in England, I found everything and everyone was just drifting along. Rather pathetic really. It all had to be changed" (p. 54). In an April 1 diary entry, he minced no words: "The original plan for Overlord was wrong ... many changes had to be made quickly. But the job has been done; Overlord is now properly 'teed up' and the plan is good" (p. 65). Monty motivated those changes by purging the ranks of the invasion planners he inherited and bringing in more than a hundred of his own people. He summarized, "We found we had to recast the operational plan, the administrative plan, and in fact practically everything" (p. 133). Virtually the only figures of consequence who avoided Montgomery's rhetorical scythe were Alan Brooke and American 1st Army commander Omar Bradley, although the latter fell into the category of those Monty classified as unknowledgeable, but willing to learn from the master.

As the battle in Normandy progressed, it became apparent that Montgomery was a risk-averting commander, at least where British and Commonwealth forces were concerned. By August 11, 1944, British and Canadian forces had sustained 68,000 casualties, but the Americans 102,000. Only 18,000 German prisoners had been captured by the British and Canadians by that date, but 92,000 by the Americans. What was Monty's reaction to frequent charges that the Commonwealth forces he led were too cautious? "The bigger American casualties are due to their lack of skill in fighting" (p. 223). He is fortunate that this comment did not come to light at the time; the pressure to sack him might have become overwhelming.

Montgomery's public stance in response to criticism that he was too timid a general was to promise Eisenhower repeatedly that the British and Canadians would undertake sustained offensives, though his own private orders consistently undercut that goal. Given the high level of Commonwealth casualties in World War I, Monty's approach was understandable, but came at a cost to his own reputation. As Beevor has noted, "Senior American officers were becoming scornful of what they saw as an inexcusable caution on the British front."[2]

Montgomery acknowledged in his diaries that Eisen-

hower had prodded him several times to become more aggressive. His July 22 diary entry states, "Eisenhower wrote me a letter which expressed concern at my stopping operations on the eastern flank" (p. 233). Several days later, Eisenhower came to visit: "He talked a good deal about public opinion in America and … the feeling that the U.S. troops were doing more than the British troops" (p. 239).

Montgomery's response was to assert repeatedly that everything was going according to his long-standing plan. Representative is his August 4 diary entry (seemingly written with future historians in mind): "If we examine the map I used in England when expounding to all General officers the development of the land battle in Normandy, it will be seen that the battle has followed almost exactly the course prescribed" (p. 269). However, Monty's own maps belie this statement, for example, with respect to his failure to capture Caen within the first few days of the invasion.

One explanation for the slow progress of Commonwealth forces against the Germans was Montgomery's claim that his eastern flank of Allied forces frequently faced the cream of German armored divisions (often true). Unable to dislodge the Germans, Monty soon began to argue that he had deliberately sought out this arrangement. "My broad policy, once we had secured a firm lodgment area, has always been to draw the main enemy forces into the battle on our eastern flank, and to fight them there, so that our affairs on the western flank could proceed the easier" (p. 174). Thus, he flexibly adjusted his rhetoric and "his plans" to reflect reality. He also fired several generals to counterattack the claim that he did not push Commonwealth forces hard enough.

Retrospectively, however, it was the failure of Montgomery to close the Falaise gap in early August 1944 and thereby trap the great bulk of German ground forces in Normandy that has subjected him to more criticism than any other of his Normandy decisions. German forces had undertaken a high-stakes offensive gamble in the form of a tank thrust to the Atlantic coast, designed to cut Allied forces in two. At least partially because of Ultra code-breaking (an advantage that Montgomery never acknowledged that he benefited from, either there or in North Africa), U.S. forces were able to repel this attack. This situation meant that German forces were overextended and plagued by highly vulnerable flanks. With Canadians and Poles under Monty's command coming from the north, and Americans under Patton's command coming from the south, the Germans could be cut off and devastated.

The Falaise gap eventually was closed, but not before many Germans escaped to fight another day. Most historians believe that Montgomery's lukewarm orders, his decision to have the Americans stop short of closing the gap, and his failure to supply reinforcements in a timely fashion were at fault. Antony Beevor concluded that this episode "would be disastrous for Montgomery's reputation and credibility"[3]. Monty fought such assessments after the war by authoring eight books, four of which dealt specifically with his war experiences. In several, he reasserted his summer 1944 Normandy claim that "present operations are absolutely as planned" (p. 263); however, the weight of historical opinion has not come down in his favor in this regard.

The picture of Montgomery painted by these documents (and especially his own letters and diary entries) is one of a highly knowledgeable and skilled organizer of military activity. Monty understood command structure, the importance of supply and the need for coordination, and the intricacies of reporting relationships. He was a capable, sometimes even inspiring, speech-maker and often elicited strong, iconic loyalty from his subordinates.

Even so, he was a man of great self-esteem and pretense who as early as February 19, 1944 wrote that "the nation is beginning to look to me to lead them to victory. The whole of England know me as 'Monty,' and I am recognized at once by every man, woman and child, in the land" (p. 46). Perhaps this self–perception was why in spring 1944 he proposed a "Public Hallowing of the Armed Forces of the Crown" at St. Paul's Cathedral and suggested that coronation regalia be utilized in the ceremony. Not surprisingly, this attempt to evoke the whiff of royalty inside the senior military hierarchy did not fly.

Bernard Montgomery was a successful military commander and his mode of operation minimized British casualties–an argument that is nonetheless debatable. The reality is that Monty harbored few doubts; he believed his view of military affairs was the gospel. Consequently, he stood ready to belittle anyone who did not agree with what he perceived to be his superior analytical intellect, unless of course they acquiesced to "learn" from him.

With respect to Montgomery's Normandy decision making, Beevor sums Monty up well: "The problem was that Montgomery, partly for reasons of morale and partly out of puerile pride, could not admit that any of his plans

had gone wrong."[4] This issue dims an otherwise illustrious military career.

Should you read the original Montgomery documents Stephen Brooks has provided? Yes, if you wish to inspect the historical basis for the critical reviews of Monty's leadership that have appeared in most recent Normandy histories. For most scholars, however, it will be enough to know that a documentary basis for such conclusions exists, and on the whole, Monty has not been dealt with unfairly.

Notes

[1]. Antony Beevor, *D-Day: The Battle for Normandy* (New York: Penguin Group, 2009), 185.

[2]. Ibid, 264.

[3] Ibid., 306.

[4] Ibid, 185.

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