

Canada and the Normandy Assault

Dan Kellar, beingthechange.ca

The marked difference in opinion among historians regarding the Canadian operations in Normandy is quite remarkable. From Official Canadian historian C.P. Stacey to Terry Copp and John English, ideas about failure and success are often in direct opposition to one another. At times it is the troops or commanders at fault for the failure of an operation, at other times poor organization and at others faulty planning. It is quite impossible to believe one author over another when dealing with these matters as each has his own interpretation and opinions but this paper will try to distinguish the similarities and differences in the interpretations and opinions of primarily Terry Copp and John A English, and secondarily of other authors and army personnel. One concept that all the authors can agree on is that Canadians fought and died valiantly from the beaches of D-Day to the defeat of the Germans armies in Normandy, and beyond. As C.P. Stacey noted and Copp reiterated in the *Maple Leaf Route*:

Three miles or so south of Caen the present-day tourist, driving down the arrow-straight road that leads to Falaise sees immediately to his right a rounded hill crowned by farm buildings. If the traveler be Canadian, he would do well to stay the wheels at this point and cast his mind back to the events of 1944; for the apparently insignificant eminence is Verriers Ridge. Well may the wheat and sugar-beet grow green and lush upon its gentle slopes, for in that now half-forgotten summer the best blood of Canada was freely poured out upon them.¹

Historians may have different views as to why and how such vast amounts of blood was let spill over the ‘half-forgotten summer’ but none can argue that it was for a heroic cause and one that will not soon be forgotten in France for generations to come.

In the header of Brigadier J.M. Rockingham’s letter to C.P. Stacey there is a quote which sums up Terry Copp’s feelings: “The tendency of Canadian historians to focus on

¹ Stacy, Colonel Charles C.P. *The Victory Campaign: North West Europe, 1944-1945*. Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1962

what went wrong instead of what went right is a well-established tradition”².

Rockingham’s letter to Stacey shows his disappointment with Stacey regarding the failure to tell of the success of the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry (RHLI) in operation ‘Spring’. Copp always has believed that though much disaster struck the Canadian army in Normandy, much heroic action also took place, and only the disasters are spoken of. From D-Day onward Copp is critical of the Air force’s inability to hit targets, the weakness of the Allied armour compared to that of the Germans, and the problems with Canadian leadership and, at times, strategy. He is also quite right when he points to the achievements made in the various operations by the Canadian troops: “Given a reasonable chance of success, the Canadian soldier proved capable of overcoming even the most elaborate defensive positions”³

The Title of John English’s book, *Failure in High Command: The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign* shows where his main criticisms of the Army lie. He constantly criticizes the ability of Canadian High Command to properly instruct its troops with strategy and guidance:

Clearly, Montgomery’s candid assertion cast new light on the interpretation that incompetent regimental officers were a major factor in impending Canadian Army training progression in Britain and, subsequently, its operational performance in Normandy...To blame regimental officers, in short, clouds the issue that the Canadian High command did not know how to train them properly and, but for Montgomery’s intervention, would have likely left them to learn the profession of arms through a process of osmosis.⁴

English does however more or less agree with Copp in several instances regarding air power, the role of armour, and the significance of terrain in the outcome of the battles of Normandy in the summer of 1944.

² Unknown Author

³ Copp, Terry. *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy*. Toronto. U of T Press: 2003. pg. 106.

⁴ English, John A. *Failure in high Command: The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign*. Ottawa. The Golden Dog Press: 1995. pg. 136

The first area that this paper will look into is the difference in opinions regarding the British and therefore Canadian operational doctrine. In World War one doctrine was easier to establish as tank and aircraft armies were in their infancy and of little importance to the outcome of the war. Tacticians developed infantry and cavalry along with artillery doctrine and once established and tested lasted until the military realized in the 1930's that the tank and plane were to be very important factors in future wars. Doctrine was written up and this was what was first followed into World War Two. The German *Blitzkrieg* made shockwaves in the ideas of armoured warfare. Eventually, through trial and error it was established that not one single way of integrating the various factions of the military would work as Copp notes:

The critics of 21 Army Group's pre-invasion training are quite right when they argue that the army's leadership failed to enforce a coherent and effective tactical doctrine. But was this a weakness or a strength? There was agreement on operational doctrine, and a flexible approach to tactical problems encouraged officers to seek solutions based on specific battlefield conditions, especially analysis of terrain using air photographs. A problem solving approach to combat has little appeal to military theorists, but it proved to be an effective method of dealing with the enemy...Again it is clear that those who criticize the Commonwealth forces for failing to develop the kind of integrated tank-infantry battle group doctrine successfully practiced by the German Army are correct: British doctrine as outlined in May 1944, allowed everything and forbade nothing. It was up to individual commanders to develop methods of employing their ranks effectively.⁵

Clearly Copp believes the flexibility of the Canadian Doctrine is an asset as it allows commanders to move on a case by case basis depending on what they are facing ahead of them. English has a different view of the flexibility issue in Canadian Doctrine. He notes that because higher command did not insist on strict conformation to orders that a unit could not fully follow orders, using discretion:

Unquestionably, they should have been intimately supported by tanks that far better than infantry chests could lean into a barrage and take a hit. Doctrine played a part here, as well as an armoured corps perception that other arms failed to understand the limitation of armour, that tanks should not be expected to lead attacks against prepared enemy

⁵ Copp, Terry. *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy*. Toronto. U of T Press: 2003. pg. 29.

antitank positions...Here, of course, the buck must be passed back to higher command for not insisting, as Montgomery did, on making armour conform even against its will.⁶

The flexibility of commanders to choose how they will go about a task in English's opinion is not the right type of doctrine of an army against a formidable opponent.

One area that both English and Copp were in agreement on was the significance of terrain to the success and failure of operations. Both wrote fundamentally the same ideas that while the *bocage* country "was anything but ideal for armour; it not only restricted main gun range but in climbing backs and crossing roads, tanks invariably heaved up, exposing their soft undersides to the deadly short-range *Panzerfaust*." The open plains of Caen sector were good for armour but equally as good for anti-armour artillery: "on the other hand, armoured attackers faced longer range tank killers like the 88 and 75mm Pak 40 deployed within a defensive grid based on woods and hamlets, backed up by a system of violent panzer counterattack(s)."⁷ Even though tanks had more mobility in The Caen sector, there was more to oppose them in the form of artillery and enemy tanks enjoying the same freedom.

A second area where English and Copp spent some time on in their books, and agree upon, is the moral of troops and how it affects operations. Copp points out how a victory can have uplifting effects on moral even after such a bloody campaign such as closing the Falaise Gap: "The Canadians and Poles who had, by strategic default, become the main instrument of the encirclement, took pride in their achievement and turned toward the Seine confident that they had done their duty and that the end of the

⁶ English, John A. *Failure in high Command: The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign*. Ottawa. The Golden Dog Press: 1995. pg. 230

⁷ English, John A. *Failure in high Command: The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign*. Ottawa. The Golden Dog Press: 1995. pg. 204

war was in sight.”⁸ This turn around in moral occurring days after groups of the various air forces accidentally bombed the Canadians and the Poles repeatedly as they were attempting to achieve their objectives crushing any moral they had left: “With close to 400 Canadian and Polish casualties incurred, however, the raid had a devastating effect on ground force morale”⁹. The armies were forced to go on for duty, but with a broken sense of hope. English point to the orders Montgomery laid down in the “suppression of reports that commented adversely upon the inadequacies of Allied tanks and equipment as compared with the German. While concern for morale prompted him to take such action, he also seems to have been convinced that when Allied weapons and equipment were intelligently used the German could be handled”¹⁰ By noting this incident English shows that Montgomery was concerned about Moral in troops dipping as he knew the problems associated with low troop moral.

Copp, throughout *Fields of Fire* is critical of the role of the allied air force. He gives praise to the achievements of the infantry who despite lack of accuracy in the air force, including multiple friendly bombing and fire accidents, still managed to succeed in the Normandy campaign: “The extraordinary achievements of the Allied soldiers, who won the battles for the beachhead despite the failure of the preparatory bombardment ‘to kill a single German soldier or silence one weapon,’ have failed to impress most military historians, who emphasize the failure to reach final objectives.”¹¹ English is also critical of the air force but gives some responsibility of the friendly fire incidents to the infantry

⁸ Copp, Terry. *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy*. Toronto. U of T Press: 2003. pg. 252

⁹ English, John A. *Failure in high Command: The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign*. Ottawa. The Golden Dog Press: 1995. pg. 298

¹⁰ English, John A. *Failure in high Command: The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign*. Ottawa. The Golden Dog Press: 1995. pg. 207

¹¹ Copp, Terry. *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy*. Toronto. U of T Press: 2003. pg. 56

commanders who ordered their soldiers to use yellow smoke to indicate friendly positions to the bombers. The problem being no one told the air force that yellow was a friendly colour contrary to their use of yellow as an enemy marker. In response to Crerar pointing fault at the Allied Expeditionary Air Forces in not telling Bomber Command about the use of the yellow 'friendly' smoke English notes "Clearly, however, a commander and staff at any higher headquarters have an ineluctable responsibility to ensure that all aspects of an operation, especially those related to the safety of their own troops, are thoroughly checked and coordinated"¹² Once again English comments that the failure in high command is partly to blame for the friendly fire incidents. Another example of air power gone wrong is during 'Atlantic': "In Dempsey's concept, some 1600 heavy bombers and 400 lighter aircraft...were expected to cut a craterless swathe over which the armoured assault could expeditiously pass."¹³ Of course the bombing created craters which slowed the armour advance considerably and caused much confusion and congestion. English seems to think craters would be an obvious result of any bombing campaign and highlights it by almost patronizing Lieutenant-General Dempsey by using the word 'concept' in such a way. Unmistakably here both authors have reservations of the prowess of the allied air force use in the Normandy campaign but take different views of it. English blames the high command for poor judgment while Copp blames the technical limitations of the force yet keeps into perspective what accomplishments the ground forces made

¹² English, John A. *Failure in high Command: The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign*. Ottawa. The Golden Dog Press: 1995. pg. 298

¹³ English, John A. *Failure in high Command: The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign*. Ottawa. The Golden Dog Press: 1995. pg. 222

In the area of allied armour English has a rather negative viewpoint of the command and technical prowess of the armoured divisions:

That Canadian armour in 'Totalize' exhibited both the dashing recklessness and excessive caution of their British brethren is, of course, striking. Such bifurcation no doubt reflected the doctrinal contradiction that grew out of Africa, and which battle experience in the static Italian campaign could hardly have been expected to resolve. Even the failure to employ available artillery resources approximated the British armoured pater, and one could well say that the operation foundered for not making better use of guns.¹⁴

In earlier discussion of morale, it was seen that reports of the inferiority of the allied armour were suppressed to not hurt troop moral. The fact that the Shermans and Churchills were weaker than the German tanks can not be disputed but the allies did try to solve this problem by adding Fireflies to divisions which were Shermans with a gun capable of busting through German armour. They also had the 6 and 17 pound artillery and PIATs to crush the advance of German armour. During operation 'Tractable' armour was used en mass to attack. Reconnaissance for this attack spotted a river but it was deemed The Laison was "fordable by tanks at almost all points."¹⁵ In fact this was not true and given that Simonds noted after Exercise 'Spartan' that a corps plan could not wait for AVRE reconnaissance, a major problem arose. In a post operation report a recommendation was made that in the "future, tank commanders rather than engineers determine whether an obstacle was a tank obstacle or not."¹⁶ Fortunately, AVREs were around with ditch filling fascines that enabled tanks to eventually cross the river. This problem with reconnaissance caused major delays in the operation and showed another

¹⁴ English, John A. *Failure in high Command: The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign*. Ottawa. The Golden Dog Press: 1995. pg. 290

¹⁵ English, John A. *Failure in high Command: The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign*. Ottawa. The Golden Dog Press: 1995. pg. 296

¹⁶ English, John A. *Failure in high Command: The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign*. Ottawa. The Golden Dog Press: 1995. pg. 296

weakness of armour. Copp on the other hand has a different view on the Canadian

Armour in the Normandy Campaign:

Earlier accounts of the pre-invasion training period and previous discussions of Anglo-Canadian doctrine were based on assumption about inadequate performance in Normandy. Since the argument of this book is that the Canadians and the rest of 21 Army Group fought highly successful campaign that required flexibility and improvisation, it seems logical to suggest that both officers and men must have learned the essentials of their trade before they entered battle.¹⁷

Copp again and again points to the susceptibility of the Allied tanks to German armour and the fact that the best ground for tanks is also the best ground for anti-tank weapons.

He also points to the great job done by Canadian armour in many battles and their ingenuity:

All the units they visited complained that the Sherman is outgunned and out-armoured by the Germans. Regiments were using the rest period to attach lengths of track over the front, back and sides of their tanks. The technical team noted that this did not provide armour protection in the strict sense; however, when the track was lightly attacked, it deflected enemy shot and functioned as 'spaced armour'...Maj. Radley-Walter's Sherman, covered in tank tracks, had survived two hits while accounting for twelve enemy armoured vehicles.¹⁸

Again, Copp points to the positive side of the battle noting the accomplishments made by the armoured forces and their ingenuity, while English looks to the negative aspects of the armoured warfare conducted by the Canadians in Normandy.

“Simonds had orchestrated one of the most remarkable operations of the war. On both sides of the Caen-Falaise highway, hundreds of armoured vehicles marshaled into columns, were advancing over the crest of the ridge.”¹⁹ The above quote is just one of many that Copp wrote in his book. His views of a competent strategy and leadership in the Canadian forces were evident. He only really questioned the higher allied command for not understanding the situations they created, especially in operation ‘Spring’ when

¹⁷ Copp, Terry. *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy*. Toronto. U of T Press: 2003. pg. 31

¹⁸ Copp, Terry. *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy*. Toronto. U of T Press: 2003. pg. 197

¹⁹ Copp, Terry. *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy*. Toronto. U of T Press: 2003. pg. 198

Montgomery, Eisenhower and Air Marshal Tedder were bickering during an important time when German morale was on the brink of collapse. They did not take advantage of the attempted assassination of Hitler by aggressively going after new objectives.²⁰ Copp also points to the Bickering between Bradley and Patton that ultimately sent the Canadians to Falaise as a matter of honour. Bradley did not want to send the Americans to Falaise as it was “a long sought after British objective and for them a matter of immense prestige. If Patton’s patrols grabbed Falaise it would be an arrogant slap in the face...when we clearly needed to build confidence in the Canadian Army.” Bradley justified his stance by noting that the American would be stretched quite thin between Argentan and Falaise and is quoted “Better a solid shoulder at Argentan than a broken neck at Falaise”²¹ Here strategy included pride when a subjective stance should have been taken with the only objective the quick elimination of the Germans and the salvation of Allied troops. Allied Strategy changed much in the preparations for D-Day, much to do with the German *Blitzkrieg* and “Before the invasion, Sargeant had worked closely with armoured corps officers in an effort to convince commanders that armoured brigades must operate in close cooperation with the artillery. {Tanks} should not lead an advance against even hastily constructed German defenses without supplementary suppressive fire.”²² Once again Copp shows that much preparation was taken before allied strategy was put into action and the leadership was there in most cases though bickering amongst high commanders sometimes caused questionable strategy. English believed that most moves made by the Canadian corps were a failure in strategy and leadership. English questions Simonds strategy of using close formations of tanks after an aerial bombing

²⁰ Copp, Terry. *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy*. Toronto. U of T Press: 2003. pg. 161

²¹ Copp, Terry. *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy*. Toronto. U of T Press: 2003. pg. 219

²² Copp, Terry. *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy*. Toronto. U of T Press: 2003. pg. 129

and not knowing that high amounts of dust would serve to confuse things. In the upcoming discussion of leadership, this will be more thoroughly discussed.

Copp does have some critiques of the Canadian leadership during the war. One is the non-interference of higher command on lower command, and the early hasty decisions of Simonds to continue with attacks that should have been called off:

Why did Simonds fail to see the light? The message logs suggest that he made the decision to go ahead with the infantry's part in Phase II on the basis of reports that the North Novas and FGH were pressing a new attack on Tilly, the knowledge that RHLI had captured Verrieres, and the information that the Calgarys had troops in or near May. He seems to have used this fragmentary evidence as grounds for launching Phase II. He was wrong, but this was not an unreasonable decision, given what he knew at the time...Operation 'Totalize' would demonstrate that Simonds could learn and grow as a commander.²³

Here once again, Copp looks to the bright side of the issue and notes that with the information Simonds had, he made a reasonable decision. Finally, Copp gives his idea of some reasons why the Canadians did so well in their operations "If the Canadian infantry performed effectively in Totalize, much of the credit would have to go to the replacement system and the training of the young captains, lieutenants, and corporals who had been promoted in the past weeks."²⁴ He suggests that the very reason the Canadians did so well was the effectiveness in the leadership to not only lead, but to train new leaders. Naturally, English has an opposite view of things: "In very large measure, responsibility for the relatively lackluster showing of Canadian arms in Normandy must be laid at the feet of division commanders. Clearly, neither Keller nor Foulkes were as tactically competent as Simonds." In regards to Keller English believes that "His subsequent confession to Simonds that his health was not good enough to stand the strains was tantamount to admitting his inability to command. It was only for the sake of divisional

²³ Copp, Terry. *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy*. Toronto. U of T Press: 2003. pg. 181

²⁴ Copp, Terry. *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy*. Toronto. U of T Press: 2003. pg. 196

morale that Simonds chose not to remove him.”²⁵ This statement clearly shows English’s conviction that the high command was flawed. His most critical words about the high command come near the end of his book what he notes “At nest, Simond’s immediate subordinates were mediocre performers. Even at brigade level, with the possible exception of Foster, a lack of tactical judgment was often evident. Within the Canadian military system Simonds was, and remains, almost *sui generis*.”²⁶ Here is almost the only time English praises Simonds capability, but only in comparison to other Canadian commanders as English believed in Montgomery’s belief that Simonds was the best bet to lead the Canadians. At many other points throughout his book, English criticizes the Canadian high command in regards to strategy, doctrine, and choices made in the heat of battle. Rarely looking on what they accomplished, as we shall see in the next section, only where they suffered and lost.

In cases of success and failure Copp took a distinctively positive mindset and wrote though some aspects of operations were failures, something was always learned and at least credit should be given to the troops involved in the battle. He always writes of why an attack failed, looking at the defenses of the Germans, the terrain of the land and unplanned for variables. English Of course looks to the negative side of battles, noting their failures and shortcomings. He rarely points to the successes that were obtained in a battle instead looking to the overall failure of the mission. A very strong example of these different viewpoints lays in the following quotes form the two authors. Copp, looking to operation ‘Totalize’ writes:

²⁵ English, John A. *Failure in high Command: The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign*. Ottawa. The Golden Dog Press: 1995. pg. 306

²⁶ English, John A. *Failure in high Command: The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign*. Ottawa. The Golden Dog Press: 1995. pg. 307

By any reasonable standard, Totalize was a very successful operation. The corps had broken through a strong defensive position manned by a fresh, full-strength infantry division and advanced 14 kilometers toward Falaise. The breakthrough did not become a breakout because 89th division fought with considerable skill, as did the battle groups of 12th SS. The arrival of the lead elements of 85th division on 10 August added significantly to the enemy's strength and convinced commanders on both sides that the new defensive position north of the Laison could be held against improvised attacks. It was time to pause and reorganize.²⁷

English wrote much differently about the same operation:

In the final analysis Operation 'Totalize' was a failure. Despite overwhelming air and artillery superiority, five divisions and two armoured brigades comprising upwards of 600 tank could not handle two depleted German divisions, mustering no more than 60 panzers and tank destroyers...It was thus mainly the 12th SS Division's resourceful handling of Tigers and Panthers that stemmed the Canadian attack.²⁸

How these two very different conclusions were obtained is quite puzzling. Clearly Copp and English are at opposite ends of the spectrum, being positive and negative respectively. Copp finishes his chapter on Falaise with a quote from a very realist perspective: "Perhaps it is time to recognize that there was no easy solution to the problems posed by an enemy that continued to wage a determined defensive battle even as its combat forces withered away."²⁹

From the above arguments it is clear to see that historians have often dramatic differences in the interpretations of battles and strategy. Copp the optimist with an ability to think in terms of being in the battle shows that while problems did exist at many levels in the Army:

The Canadian citizen army that fought in the Battle of Normandy played a role all out of proportion of its relative strength among the Allied armies. This was especially true within 21 Army group, where due to a mixture of Canadian pride and the British desire to limit their own casualties, Canadian divisions were required to fight more often than their British counterparts. The oft-quoted statistics which show that the Canadians suffered considerable heavier casualties than other division in 21 army group are the product of a greater number of days in close combat with the enemy, not evidence of operational or

²⁷ Copp, Terry. *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy*. Toronto. U of T Press: 2003. pg. 211

²⁸ English, John A. *Failure in high Command: The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign*. Ottawa. The Golden Dog Press: 1995. pg. 289

²⁹ Copp, Terry. *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy*. Toronto. U of T Press: 2003. pg. 213

tactical failure. Perhaps it is time to recognize the extraordinary achievements that marked the progress of the Canadians across Normandy's Fields of fire.³⁰

English oppositely has the role of pessimist noting:

Looking at the Canadian army performance in Normandy up to the end of July 1944, it would seem fair to say that the lives of many soldiers were unnecessarily cast away...As for other units introduced piecemeal to ballet, and whose soldiers also have all that mortals could, the responsibility must rest with the high command.³¹

Either way you look at it, the price paid by Canadian soldiers in World War Two, especially in the Normandy campaign was quite high; be it the fault of the high command as English believes, or the weaknesses of armour and air power, or as Copp thinks, due to a formidable opponent, the price paid allowed the allies achieve victory in Normandy, and drove the victory in Europe a few months later.

³⁰ Copp, Terry. *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy*. Toronto. U of T Press: 2003. pg. 267

³¹ English, John A. *Failure in high Command: The Canadian Army and the Normandy Campaign*. Ottawa. The Golden Dog Press: 1995. pg. 256