

Victory and Defeat? Perceptions of the British Army in Northwest Europe, 1944–1945

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1980s, the reputation of the British Army in the Northwest European campaign of 1944-45 has been seriously undermined due to the interpretations of a number of popular writers such as Max Hastings and Carlo D'Este. In particular, they have questioned the fighting power of Montgomery's 21st Army Group, its lack of imagination in the offensive, and a distinct unwillingness to engage effectively in close combat. According to this interpretation, the British Army has also been found wanting when contrasted with the dynamic, flexible, and much lauded German Army, even in the last year of the war.

This article seeks to understand why this now widely accepted interpretation has emerged, to examine its historiographical development, and to analyze its evidentiary underpinnings. It challenges the basis of the 1980s orthodoxy as being founded on a narrow and overly traditional interpretation of military effectiveness, raises the influence of historical and professional vested interests in distorting the assessment of the effectiveness of the British Army in 1944-45, and seeks to place our understanding of the campaign into its proper context and not view the actions and capabilities of the army through the prism of a skewed post-war analysis.

KEYWORDS

British Army; doctrine; historiography; Montgomery, Field Marshal Bernard Law; Northwest Europe, 1944-45; operations; revisionist; World War II

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Introduction

In May 1945 British troops in 21st Army Group began celebrating their success in helping to defeat Hitler's forces in Europe. Many at the time would have considered that theirs was a job well done. Grim, uncompromising, and nasty the campaign may have been, but to have

brought about victory in less than a year was a remarkable achievement considering the obduracy, desperation, and determination of their opponents. This was doubly so when one considers the low points of 1940-41 from which the British Army had had to retrieve itself, and the highly pertinent point that many of its soldiers had, prior to June 1944, never seen frontline action; soldiers' accounts tell us repeatedly that however good training was, it was as nothing compared to the realities of combat. In the afterglow of victory, the success of the campaign seemed obvious and apparent.

Yet history and historians have not served the reputation of the British Army in Northwest Europe well, painting a more negative picture of the army in the 1944-45 campaign than the soldiers of 1945 might have imagined. By the 1980s and beyond, writers such as Max Hastings and Carlo D'Este and film, television, and electronic games media had all helped to establish a more critical view of the British Army's performance, particularly compared to the much lauded Germany Army which had supposedly introduced *blitzkrieg* to the world and had resisted much larger enemy forces with skill and determination into 1945.¹ Forty years after the end of hostilities, the standing both in popular and academic writing of the 1944-45 British Army in Northwest Europe was not good; barely competent was the best epithet that one would encounter. This revisionist view is now so entrenched that it has become the new orthodoxy, portraying the German Army as tactically and operationally dynamic, flexible, and innovative, and the British Army as ponderous, unimaginative, and antediluvian.

It is the aim of this article to explain how and why the combat effectiveness, operational techniques, and capabilities of the British Army were so tarnished by the time of the fortieth anniversary celebrations, and to what extent such views were justified or have been modified in the last fifteen years.

Establishing the Orthodoxy

Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery, commander of 21st Army Group, was proud of his and his army's achievements and took great personal pleasure on 4 May 1945 in milking the surrender ceremony of German forces opposing his armies. He wrote: "It has been a privilege and an honour to command this great British Empire team in Western Europe. Few commanders can have had such loyal service as you have given me."² He realized, perhaps more than most, what a difficult campaign it had been and what a delicate balancing act he had had to perform in coaxing out of a contracting and relatively inexperienced army a contribution to victory that matched the international status of Britain and the ambition of the politicians

1. The best and most widespread of these have been Max Hastings, *Overlord: D-Day and the Battle for Normandy 1944* (London: Michael Joseph, 1984) and Carlo D'Este, *Decision in Normandy* (London: Collins, 1983).

2. Montgomery of Alamein, *The Memoirs of Field Marshal Montgomery* (London: Collins, 1958 – Companion Book Club Edition, 1960), pp. 315-16.

at home, not least the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill.

And it had been a difficult campaign, especially for the conscripts who constituted some 75% of all the soldiers and who were most interested in merely getting the job done as quickly as possible and returning home to Civvy Street.³ More than half the British armed forces' total Second World War casualties had been suffered in the final eighteen months of the war, and the casualty rates endured by the army in Normandy had surpassed those of Third Ypres or Passchendaele in 1917.⁴ For the humble infantryman in the rifle companies, the situation was worse still. Though they constituted a mere 10% of the army, they suffered some 75% of the casualties, and in the fiercest fighting of all between D-Day and the end of August, the seven British infantry divisions suffered an average loss of three-quarters of their initial frontline strength.⁵

The cost had been high, but the victory was theirs and to most contemporaries the army in Northwest Europe had apparently done well in contributing significantly to the victory after the disasters of Dunkirk, Norway, Greece, Singapore, and the many setbacks of the North African campaign prior to the summer of 1942. Initial histories and coverage, for the most part anyway, supported this general opinion. Indeed, of the Normandy campaign the official history stated in 1962 that, "The conduct of the Twenty-First Army Group's operations during the battle of Normandy gives little occasion for adverse criticism. Its troops had been consistently well led."⁶

Montgomery himself proved to be a key player in developing this official view in his account of the Northwest European campaign, *Normandy to the Baltic* (1947) and his *Memoirs* of 1958. In the former, Monty stated that the Normandy battle had gone exactly according to the pre-invasion plan and that those who had begun to have misgivings about his conduct of operations – presumably meaning Air Marshal Arthur Tedder and General Frederick Morgan at SHAEF – had simply been wrong and had in essence lacked his resolve.⁷ The notion that all had been well with the British Army and its operations against the enemy and that Montgomery was a great commander who had barely put a foot wrong in the campaign to liberate Northwest Europe was further reinforced by the accounts of Francis "Freddie" de Guingand (*Operation Victory*, 1947) who was Montgomery's

3. UK NA (National Archives, Kew, London, UK) WO 277/12, *Manpower Problems*, p. 80.

4. John Terraine, *The Smoke and the Fire: Myths and Anti-Myths of War, 1861-1945* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1980), p. 46; L.F. Ellis, *Victory in the West*, Vol. I, *The Battle of Normandy* (London: HMSO, 1962), p. 493.

5. John Ellis, *The Sharp End of War* (London: Windrow and Greene, 1990 edition – originally 1980), p. 158; UK NA WO 285/13, Casualties and Ammunition, 2nd Army 1944-5.

6. Ellis, *Victory in the West*, Vol. I, p. 491.

7. Montgomery of Alamein, *Normandy to the Baltic* (London: Hutchinson, 1947 – Book Club Associates edition, 1973), pp. 281-85.

chief of staff from 1942-45; John North's *North-West Europe 1944-5: The Achievement of 21st Army Group* (1953); Eversley Belfield and Hubert Essame's *The Battle for Normandy* (1965); and Essame's *The Battle for Germany* (1969) and *Normandy Bridgehead* (1970).⁸

In part, this reluctance to engage in a critical appraisal of the campaign and the effectiveness or otherwise of the British Army was born of a desire to lay the ghosts of the war to rest; it was after all the recent past both for soldiers and for the historians writing the accounts. British commanders preferred not to criticize their fellows too openly and stuck to a unified view of the war and the campaign in Northwest Europe 1944-45, whilst for others the trauma of the war was such that questioning the conduct of the fighting and the sacrifices made was anathema. Michael Howard noted in 1991 that historians of his generation had not grappled with the weaknesses of the British Army "as frankly and openly as perhaps we should."⁹

Yet despite the emergence of this unquestioning and almost hagiographical view of the campaign in the immediate post-war era, much had changed by the 1980s and the time of the fortieth anniversary celebrations. Max Hastings' widely read *Overlord*, published in 1984 for the anniversary, captures the essence of the change in interpretation and perspective. Hastings, a journalist and sometime editor of the British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*, was closely associated with the British Army having been a chosen and "acceptable" reporter to the establishment during the Falklands War of 1982 and, as will be seen, this relationship may well have helped shape his interpretation of the Normandy campaign. Hastings was immensely impressed by the performance and ability of the German Army in 1944 referring to them as best of the war and as "one of the greatest that the world has ever seen."¹⁰ He eulogized the Germans' fierce determination, "modern" battle doctrines, and flexible initiative-based systems of leadership, interpretations that were prevalent in the British Army by the 1980s.¹¹ Against this he portrayed the Allies, and the British and Canadians in particular, as being heavily reliant on simple superiority in resources, overwhelming air support, and brute force in order to win. He further stated that throughout the war whenever similarly sized German and Allied units encountered each other, the Germans invariably came out on top. Hastings,

8. Francis de Guingand, *Operation Victory* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1947); John North, *North-West Europe, 1944-5: The Achievement of 21st Army Group* (London: HMSO, 1953); Eversley Belfield and Hubert Essame, *The Battle for Normandy* (London: Batsford, 1965); Hubert Essame, *The Battle for Germany* (London: Batsford, 1969) and *Normandy Bridgehead* (London: Ballantine, 1970).

9. Michael Howard in Richard H. Kohn, "The Scholarship on World War Two: Its present condition and future possibilities," *The Journal of Military History*, vol. 55, no. 3 (July 1991).

10. Hastings, *Overlord*, p. 370.

11. See John Kiszely, "The British Army and Approaches to Warfare since 1945," in Brian Holden Reid, ed., *Military Power: Land Warfare in Theory and Practice* (London: Cass, 1997).

in typical male military historian style, was also fixated on equipment, and in particular the technical and theoretical capabilities of items such as tanks. He argued that German equipment was generally much superior, that the Allies had sacrificed quality in order to facilitate quantity, and that this policy severely hampered British troops in Normandy. On Operation GOODWOOD, the attempt by British armored units to drive south from Caen on 18 July 1944, Hastings claimed that if they had been equipped with Panthers and Tigers they would have had a much greater chance of success.¹² Much of this borders on mere speculation and counterfactual thinking, and passes over the fact that later German tanks were notoriously unreliable and over-engineered. Nevertheless, Hastings' book, and his later *Armageddon: The Battle for Germany 1944-45* (2004) were enormously popular and continue to sell heavily to the present.¹³

Carlo D'Este's book, *Decision in Normandy*, published a year earlier, is better balanced and takes a more rounded view of the campaign, but still extols the virtues of the German soldier above his Allied contemporary. More specifically however, D'Este singles out the British and Canadian armies for criticism based on their cautious and careful approach to the conduct of operations. In a chapter titled "The Price of Caution," D'Este argues that the British were unwilling to prosecute attacks with gusto and determination for fear of suffering heavy casualties, and that this was due to a dwindling supply of replacements from the United Kingdom, the so-called "manpower problem."¹⁴ To a degree, Montgomery and his staff were aware of this and planned accordingly. They sacrificed bold dynamism on the battlefield for slow, remorseless attrition aimed at breaking the Germans with firepower – primarily artillery and air power – in order to avoid the heavy losses that would probably be incurred in close combat with the tactically adept and determined Germans. The problem with this approach, as D'Este saw it, was that the British Army's lack of drive actually prolonged the campaign and generated more casualties, particularly when the fighting bogged down into an infantry-based slogging match between mid-June and early-August, something which the Allies had not imagined likely. A bold and dashing army, willing to suffer higher casualties in the short term, would have brought the campaign to a speedier conclusion and limited overall casualties, he argued.

Colonel D'Este's perspective may well also have been influenced by his military career in the United States. The U.S. Army's view of their British counterparts was firstly damaged by their adoption of some World War II German tactical methods and doctrines in the post-1945 world which was

12. Hastings, *Overlord*, pp. 224-31 and p. 180 on the latter point in particular.

13. Max Hastings, *Armageddon: The Battle for Germany 1944-45* (London: Macmillan, 2004).

14. John Peaty, "Myth, Reality and Carlo D'Este," *War Studies Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Spring 1996); John Peaty, "Manpower and 21st Army Group," Ph.D. thesis, King's College London, 2001.

then justified and underpinned by a rejection of Allied, and most obviously, British methods used in the Second World War. Second, American military opinion of the British began to sour following the breakdown in relations in certain quarters from late 1944 onwards for which Montgomery's arrogance, intransigence, and overweening self-justification must shoulder some considerable responsibility. However, the situation was worsened by the battle of the memoirs in which Eisenhower, Walter Beddell Smith (Ike's Chief of Staff), and then Montgomery himself published accounts critical of their colleagues in the Northwest European campaign.¹⁵ Both of these factors – one born of professional military interest and the other for the historical record – may well have shaped D'Este's perspective on the campaign.¹⁶ Irrespective of this, his book, along with Hastings' volume, sold widely and in bulk from the 1980s onwards and did more than anything else to forge the popular historical interpretation that persists to today, as evidenced by Antony Beevor's recent bestseller of 2009, which largely repackaged many of their arguments.¹⁷

Subsequently, many writers have followed suit to the extent that what Hastings and D'Este thought revisionist became, over the ensuing years, the established orthodoxy. In *Military Effectiveness*, a seminal three-volume series published in the 1980s, Williamson Murray's chapter on the British Army in the Second World War castigated the army's inability to devise and then impose a workable battle doctrine on its units prior to the 1944 campaign. Because of this, the combat effectiveness of the British Army compared badly with the Germans, and even the Americans. Murray fixed the blame for this on archaic approaches to doctrine, an inability to interpret the lessons of the first years of the war, and an unwillingness to train the army properly.

The real cause of such a state of affairs lay in the failure of the army leadership to enunciate a clearly thought out doctrine and then institute a thorough training program to insure its acceptance throughout the army.¹⁸

He continued: "The response to tactical weaknesses (and perhaps partially their cause) was to use materiel to correct those deficiencies."¹⁹ Consequently, the British resorted to grinding attritional methods to compensate for tactical weakness, and this was a root cause of their apparently sluggish performance in Northwest Europe, 1944-45. John Ellis

15. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948); Walter Bedell Smith, *Eisenhower's Six Great Decisions: Europe, 1944-1945* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1956).

16. D'Este, *Decision in Normandy*. See chapter 16, pp. 271-97 in particular.

17. Antony Beevor, *D-Day: The Battle for Normandy* (London: Penguin, 2009).

18. Williamson Murray, "British Military Effectiveness in the Second World War," in Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, eds., *Military Effectiveness*, Vol. III, *The Second World War* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), p. 125.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 129.

pursued the notion of Allied numbers winning a war of attrition in his bluntly titled 1990 book *Brute Force*. Here the Allied mass of resources won in spite of doctrinal and operational weakness, whilst the Germans and even the Japanese demonstrated tactical flair and dynamism. The British and Montgomery were criticized for over-caution, lack of imagination, and ill-conceived attritional tactics.²⁰ Russell Hart, in his analytical and scholarly account of the Allied campaign in Normandy, *Clash of Arms*, whilst also critical of German military performance, nonetheless established a hierarchy of combat effectiveness in which the Germans came out on top, followed by the Americans, with the British and Canadians somewhat behind. Hart is particularly scathing about operational techniques and British armored forces.²¹ More recently still Robert Citino, who has written widely on operational art and German methods of warfare, compared British operational and tactical methods in Northwest Europe in 1944-45 with those of their opponents and found them seriously wanting, particularly when it came to recognizing key moments in battles and seizing them.

The real link between D-Day, Villers-Bocage, Epsom and Goodwood is that none of them was carried out within the spirit of mobile warfare...What the British army lacked were officers who could recognize such momentary opportunities when they arose and a military culture that encouraged them to seize those golden moments.²²

Thus, given the cumulative effect of these works and indeed others over the last quarter of a century, we are ultimately rendered an image of the British Army in Northwest Europe as ponderous, predictable, unimaginative, and cautious, an army fortunate in being able to rely heavily on materiel, resources and strong Allies to make good its deficiencies. This impression has been garnished in a popular sense by films such as *A Bridge Too Far* (1977) and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), the television series *Band of Brothers* (2001) and computer games of the *Call of Duty* variety. Most tellingly, however, this image is one of an army that would be largely unrecognizable to those who fought in 1944-45 and certainly to Montgomery and his senior staff.

The Path to Dissent

Yet, the roots of the new orthodoxy can in fact be traced much further back than the writings of Hastings and D'Este to the immediate post-war period, for alongside the efforts of Monty and his protagonists, others had started to raise questions over the conduct of the 1944-45 Northwest European

20. John Ellis, *Brute Force: Allied Strategy and Tactics in the Second World War* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1990).

21. Russell A. Hart, *Clash of Arms: How the Allies Won in Normandy* (Boulder: Rienner, 2001).

22. Robert M. Citino, *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm: The Evolution of Operational Warfare* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), p. 108.

campaign and of the army itself. Three key players are worth noting in this period: the historian Basil Liddell Hart, the journalist Chester Wilmot, and the military professional Giffard Le Quesne Martel.

Liddell Hart is now considered to be a controversial, if still very important, influence in the development of military history, particularly in the United Kingdom.²³ His views on the Normandy campaign which have proved immensely influential were that the Allies had too easily passed over the significance of their overwhelming strength in numbers and resources in assessing the cause of their victory. Indeed, he stated that "There has been too much glorification of the campaign and too little objective investigation."²⁴ In the post-1945 era he was given access to senior German generals and officers captured at the end of the war and allowed to interview them for a book, published in 1951 and titled *The Other Side of the Hill*. In this work Liddell Hart, keen to demonstrate that German operational and tactical success in the Second World War was largely attributable to the influence of his own pre-1939 writing on the conduct and nature of modern mobile warfare, drew on much testimony from the Germans themselves to emphasize his importance. Fairly obviously, surviving senior German officers were keen to curry favor with whomsoever they spoke, and it seems that where the interviews did not always endorse his perceptions, Liddell Hart embellished them to prove his case anyway. He had been a keen advocate of mechanized warfare prior to 1939, but in reality there is little direct evidence that he was widely read in Germany and the link is tenuous at best. In addition, in his published work and in his private correspondence with a range of other academics, military professionals, and writers he argued strongly that a cause of British operational sterility in the war was attributable to the army's ignoring his counsel before 1939.²⁵ Liddell Hart also cited weaknesses in the morale and determination of British troops in Northwest Europe, claiming that too often advancing units in 1944-45 ground to a halt after suffering "trifling casualties." He even went as far to suggest that the infamous Great War epithet "lions led by donkeys" could be turned on its head in the Second World War, as commanders struggled to get their soldiers to prosecute attacks strenuously.²⁶

Liddell Hart's influence can also be detected in the work of Chester Wilmot, an Australian journalist attached to 21st Army Group in Northwest

23. See Alex Danchev, *Alchemist of War: The Life of Basil Liddell Hart* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1999).

24. LHCMA (Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College London) Liddell Hart 11/1944/43-52, "Lessons of Normandy."

25. See Basil Liddell Hart, *The Other Side of the Hill* (London: Cassell, 1951). See also his correspondence and writings held at LHCMA. LHCMA Liddell Hart 11/1944/43-52, "Lessons of Normandy," 1952, as an example. There is also correspondence between Liddell Hart and Wilmot. See also J.P. Harris, "The Myth of Blitzkrieg," *War in History*, vol. 2, no. 3 (1995).

26. LHCMA Liddell Hart 11/1944/43-52, "Lessons of Normandy"; Liddell Hart 9/28/84, Tanks in Normandy, Liddell Hart to CS Forester, 18 February 1952.

Europe in 1944-45. Wilmot reported on the campaign and later published a widely read account of the war, *The Struggle for Europe*, in 1952. In this work he recounted the frustrations felt by British commanders at their inability to get their troops to advance quickly enough in the face of German opposition in Normandy, most obviously during the "stalemate" in June and July. Informed by captured German intelligence assessments of Allied troops and by some internal Allied reports, and naturally aided by Liddell Hart's letters, Wilmot wrote that British troops lacked drive and determination and were far too quick to resort to firepower to solve their difficulties. This resulted in slow, painful progress when the Germans obdurately dug-in in Normandy and illustrated the lack of grit on the part of the British army.²⁷ It should be noted, however, that German intelligence assessments issued to troops were often written with the intention of bolstering German morale as much as providing accurate information.²⁸ Moreover, a key piece of Wilmot's evidence, a report written in July 1944 by the New Zealander Brigadier James Hargest, although scathing about Allied performance, was based on a narrow selection of actions from the earliest stages of the fighting. In addition, Hargest was never afforded the opportunity to revise his views following better performances by British troops later in the campaign, as he was killed in July 1944. However, his report remained on the record and has since been widely cited by historians and writers from Wilmot onwards.²⁹

Wilmot's book, though widely read, only hinted at the problems facing British commanders, but Giffard Le Quesne Martel's writings, publications, and lectures in the post-war world, though on a smaller scale, were directly aimed at revising British operational and tactical methods and steering them away from the approaches employed in the Second World War. Martel, a retired lieutenant general in the British Army, and a keen advocate of mechanized manoeuvre warfare since the 1930s, was critical of British operational methods in the Second World War and claimed that in the post-1945 world attrition and linear tactics must be replaced by mobility and mechanization, based on the achievements of the German Army between 1939 and 1945. According to "Q Martel," his colloquial sobriquet, the British and later NATO had to abandon the methods of the Second World War in the new Cold War era and embrace the German manoeuvrist approach.³⁰

27. Chester Wilmot, *The Struggle for Europe* (London: Collins, 1965 edition – first published 1952), p. 339, pp. 427-28, and pp. 463-64.

28. LHCMA Dempsey, 2nd Army Intelligence Summary no. 46, 20 July 1944. A translated *Panzer Lehr* Division report is the most cited.

29. UK NA CAB 106/1060, Reports from Normandy, 6 June - 10 July 1944, Brigadier James Hargest; see David French, "'Tommy is no Soldier': The Morale of the Second British Army in Normandy, June-August 1944," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1996).

30. As an example, see Giffard Le Quesne Martel, *East versus West* (London: Museum Press, 1952); *Our Armoured Forces* (London: Faber & Faber, 1945); *The Problem of*

Mobility must have top priority. It replaces the numerical strength of the Russian masses... [our tanks] must be able to move rapidly between enemy columns or round their flanks, attack them in the rear....³¹

Martel mirrored a growing perception within the British Army that the emerging requirements of the Cold War and the need to confront Warsaw Pact forces in central Europe were forcing a re-evaluation of fighting techniques and methods. To this end, they sought the input of senior German commanders from the war to provide input into how the Russians had fought, their operational techniques and tactical methods, and how best to combat them. Naturally, German officers extolled their own capabilities and blamed their defeat in the war on the overwhelming numbers of the enemy rather than their own shortcomings. With little evidence to question this analysis, NATO officers accepted that Western Allied methods from the war were no longer appropriate for confronting the Russians; after all, the Allies had relied on superiority in resources and numbers to defeat the Germans, and against the more numerous and heavily resourced Soviets this would no longer apply. German commanders such as Kurt Meyer and many others were also quite open in their criticism of Western Allied methods which they believed had been pedestrian, predictable, and unimaginative. Victory had been achieved because of the Allies' superiority in resources and in the air, and they contended that if German commanders had been in their position with such ample materiel and troops, the Normandy campaign and the liberation of Western Europe would have taken much less time.³² The startling successes of the Germans during the *blitzkrieg* era further underscored the point that the Allies had much to learn from their erstwhile opponents.

For western armies seeking new approaches to confronting the Warsaw Pact forces in Europe therefore, the Germans' apparent ability to maximize the effectiveness of smaller but technically and tactically adept units seemed to offer a starting point. For many in the British and U.S. armies, the operational and tactical success of the Germans was broadly attributable to doctrine. It was argued that the German Army had instilled a more "mission-based" approach to operations known as *auftragstaktik*. This devolved decision making to commanders on the spot, rather than requiring them to stick to rigid plans, as it was believed that only commanders at the front

Security (London: Michael Joseph, 1945); comments by Martel following a lecture at the Royal United Services Institute, *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute*, vol. 96 (1951), p. 62.

31. Giffard Le Quesne Martel, "Tank Policy," *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute*, vol. 95, part 3 (August 1951), p. 449.

32. Kurt Meyer, *Grenadiers* (Winnipeg: J.J. Fedorowicz, 1994), pp. 146 and 280-98 is a good example here. Meyer was also wheeled out to instruct Western officers where they had made mistakes against his troops in 1944: LHCMA 11/1944-45 Canadian Land Forces Staff Course, *Normandy Battlefield Study* (1988).

could properly identify the key moments in battle and seize opportunities when they arose. This style was in marked contrast to Montgomery's closely controlled battles which emphasized careful planning and conformity and which according to some interpretations stifled initiative and squandered Citino's "golden moments."³³ It was also of course recognized that Germany had indeed lost the war, but this was attributed to inadequate long-term strategic planning and poor macroeconomic organization, things at which the Allies already excelled and which in any case were much less likely to matter in a war in the nuclear age. The German defeat did not, therefore, invalidate their tactical and operational acumen.³⁴

As the Cold War progressed, the positive image of the German Army's tactical and operational capabilities in the Second World War became embedded in the culture of the British and U.S. armies, eventually forming a key part of the manoeuvre warfare concept.³⁵ The notion that German units had outfought their Allied opponents in 1944-45 and had only been undone by the Allies' strength in numbers manifested itself in many ways. For example, battlefield tours to Normandy for British army officers in the 1980s regularly examined Operation GOODWOOD (18-20 July 1944). The army's intention was that the Sandhurst academics would use the battle to demonstrate to their charges the weaknesses in British methods and the flexibility and superior doctrine of the Germans, even when the historians disagreed with this interpretation. Moreover, the terminology and approach of the British Army increasingly began to reflect U.S. thinking, and both armies tried to capture the elements of effectiveness that had underpinned supposed German military efficiency and dynamism in the Second World War.³⁶ It is more than possible therefore that Max Hastings' time with senior British officers would have exposed him to the army's positive view of the German Army of World War II and indeed their growing criticisms of the methods and techniques of Montgomery's forces in 1944-45.³⁷ It could be inferred therefore that this contributed to Hastings' comments in *Overlord*:

For an example to follow in the event of a future European battle, it will be necessary to look at the German army; and to the extraordinary defence that its men conducted in Europe in the face of all the odds against them....³⁸

It is important to note, however, that whatever the needs and requirements

33. Mungo Melvin, "The German Perspective," in John Buckley, ed., *The Normandy Campaign 1944: Sixty Years On* (London: Routledge, 2006) for an excellent analysis of German doctrine in Northwest Europe.

34. Major General Roy Dixon, interview with author, October 2002.

35. Kiszely, "The British Army," in Holden Reid, ed.

36. My thanks to Professor Gary Sheffield for this insight into the army's attitudes to teaching in the 1980s; discussions with Professor Stephen Badsey on Sandhurst curriculum in the 1980s.

37. Hastings was attached to the Falklands War taskforce in 1982, for example.

38. Hastings, *Overlord*, p. 374.

of the Cold War in planning and training to fight the Warsaw Pact, it was deeply misleading and indeed misguided to cherry pick certain aspects and elements of the military conduct of the Second World War to reinforce contemporary professional views on fighting techniques in the post-1945 era. Such methods may well have been entirely appropriate for the Cold War, but it did not follow that the methods employed in the Second World War were therefore invalid, in the context of 1944-45. However, this was the view adopted to justify the growing emphasis on manoeuvrist concepts of war. The basic question was why had the British not employed fast manoeuvre warfare methods, particularly from 1943 onwards, that were supposedly akin to those employed by the Germans during World War II? For Field Marshal Lord Carver, it was simply down to the British Army still not having thrown off the doctrinal shackles of the Great War.³⁹

Other writing, broadly aimed at the professional and academic market, served to enhance the reputation of the German Army still further. Trevor Dupuy's book *A Genius for War: The German Army and General Staff, 1807-1945* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977) attempted to understand "...why for over a century, Germany produced the world's best armies," and naturally therefore why they had outperformed opposing armies during this period. It serves to pause for a moment and consider the basic premise of the book: it is after all about an army that fought two vast wars in the twentieth century, the second the most brutal and appalling war in modern history, and lost both. Dupuy's defense was to detach the "war" from the "fighting" and focus on the latter. This, however, removes a vital part of any army's *raison d'être*: it does not exist merely to fight battles, it must also win the war, or at least achieve the political objectives set down for it and do this within its capabilities and available resources, something the German Army palpably failed to do. However, according to Dupuy's narrow definition, broadly based on tactical and to a degree operational capability and yet quite divorced from context, the German Army was presented as the best. Moreover, his thesis was backed up by statistical data, albeit of a highly questionable nature. In a series of studies, he used quite elaborate and convoluted computations based on loss ratios and combat positions to argue that German soldiers were approximately 20% more efficient than Allied soldiers.⁴⁰

By 1982 it was no longer necessary even to address the question of if the

39. M. Carver, "Tanks and Infantry – The Need for Speed," *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute*, vol. 95, part 3 (August 1951), p. 453.

40. Trevor Dupuy, *Numbers, Predictions and War: Using History to Evaluate Combat Factors and Predict the Outcome of Battles* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1979); Dupuy, *Genius for War*, introduction; S.L.A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1947); see also Robert Engen, *Canadians Under Fire: Infantry Effectiveness in the Second World War* (Montreal: McGill-Queens' University Press, 2009); Terry Copp, *Fields of Fire: The Canadians in Normandy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), introduction.

German Army had been superior. Martin van Creveld's study *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939-1945* (1982) simply accepted as a starting position that the German Army had been superior and endeavored to explain how and why this was the case.

History is said to consist of reputations; if the reputation of an army is a measure of its quality, the German Army certainly stands second to none.⁴¹

One might argue that if history consists of reputations then it is surely the role of the historian to challenge such reputations rather than accept them. Moreover, the reputation of the German Army of World War II stands as one of the most brutal, laced with widespread atrocities. In the planning of Barbarossa, the codename for the invasion of the USSR in June 1941, it was incorporated into logistical planning that, in order to limit pressure on the German Army's supply network, the soldiers would live off the land, even though this would result in the deaths of millions of Russian civilians.⁴² So much for reputations. Nevertheless, van Creveld settled on military culture and doctrine as the key determinants in German military effectiveness certainly as compared to their Allied opponents.

The acceptance of German mastery of the battlefield was also founded upon the work of S.L.A. Marshall, a controversial writer who published a series of findings supposedly based upon substantial after action reports and interviews gathered in his role at the U.S. Army's G-2 Historical Branch. These findings appeared in a 1947 book entitled *Men Against Fire*, which appeared to establish the lower effectiveness of Western Allied soldiers, for the research indicated that only some 15-25% of U.S. frontline combat soldiers ever fired their weapons in anger. Though Marshall's findings have since been scrutinized and found seriously wanting – one historian has even stated that Marshall had made the whole thing up – the notion that Allied soldiers, perhaps more than German soldiers, avoided direct gunfire combat and kept their heads down to the extent that they made no discernible contribution has seeped into the historiographical body.⁴³

Much of this material has helped to fuel the growing fascination with the German Army and its supposed strengths and fighting power in the wider popular field of military history. The output of television documentaries and coffee table books on the armies of the Third Reich, particularly the SS, is vast and unnerving. Bookshops generally carry large stocks of military history, but an unhealthy amount of the material on World War II focuses on

41. Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and US Army Performance 1939-1945* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1982), p. 4.

42. Alex Kay, "Germany's *Staatssekretäre*, Mass Starvation and the Meeting of 2nd May 1941," *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 41, no. 4 (October 2006).

43. The best recent discussion on S.L.A. Marshall is Engen, *Canadians Under Fire*. See also Copp, *Fields of Fire*, introduction, pp. 10-12; Roger J. Spiller, "S.L.A. Marshall and the Ratio of Fire," *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute*, winter (1988).

the German military machine, often extolling martial virtues, equipment, and fighting capability. The starting point is generally the superiority of the German Army against which the British, Soviet, and American armies appear dull and prosaic. It is a disturbing statistic that in the UK 75% of all World War II reenactors join German units, and of those 75% want to be in SS units, a clear indication of the lurid fascination for the German Army, fuelled by the belief that it was a great fighting machine.⁴⁴ Indeed, despite the total calamity that engulfed Hitler's forces in 1945, it is the German Army that is held in high esteem, both professionally and popularly, not those that defeated it.

A New Perspective?

It is against this tide of accepted historical "understanding" that the British Army in 1944-45 has been measured and, particularly since the 1980s, been found wanting. Yet this image and the analysis underpinning it do not bear close scrutiny, for they are predominantly founded upon a narrow and old fashioned definition of military effectiveness, one that focuses far too specifically on close combat tactics and equipment alone, to the exclusion of areas such as logistics, planning, intelligence, engineering, long-range firepower, medical support, communications, and liaison, all areas at which the British Army and their Western Allies excelled and the Germans were appreciably weaker. An army's activities are not purely defined by close combat, though that is how writers such as Hastings, Dupuy, and van Creveld, for example, have measured the "effectiveness" of the Germans and hence why they have been viewed as successful. It is inescapable that German soldiers displayed great determination, a high degree of tactical flexibility, and an obdurate mentality in the last eighteen months of the war for a variety of reasons such as ideological motivation, fatalism, fear of retribution, and doctrinal inculcation, but this was achieved in part at the expense of reducing the resources devoted to supply, intelligence, and sustainability.⁴⁵

This emphasis on frontline fighting numbers, however, has been identified by some as a positive advantage for the Germans. John English in *On Infantry* (1994) referred to the "Divisional Slice" notion as a means of ascertaining efficiency. The Slice is determined by dividing the total number of soldiers in an army by the number of divisions fielded; the higher the figure, the less efficient the army. It is a crude statistical device, but English

44. BBC documentary, *Weekend Nazis*, presented by John Sweeney, 2007.

45. See Wolfram Wette, *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).; Martin van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), chapters 5, 6, and 7; David French, *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War against Germany, 1919-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 278; Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), chapters 3 and 4.

used it to demonstrate that the Germans were more efficient than the Western Allies and required fewer personnel to keep a fighting soldier in the field. English berated the Western armies for creating the problem of "oversupply," that is having far too many troops supporting the teeth arms rather than fighting themselves.⁴⁶ However, this interpretation can equally be turned on its head, for the British and other western armies suffered far lower casualty and death rates than their opponents. Moreover, their forces did not suffer excessive attrition, nor did they fail to achieve their political objectives. In large part these positive elements can be attributed to excellent planning and intelligence, efficient transport and engineering, and plentiful logistical and medical support, and an overarching integrated and holistic approach to war fighting. This was achieved because of the balance between tail and teeth. Simply having more troops in the frontline may have increased short-term effectiveness, but it also contributed to long-term disintegration.⁴⁷

A modern army must therefore attend to all the requisite parts of its functioning to endure beyond a few weeks and equally must match its actions to its strategic objectives. Moreover, it must balance the manner in which it functions against the political and social environment in which it operates. At this the British were highly effective, much more so than their German adversaries. Montgomery's command and leadership were characterized by three key factors that help to explain why the British Army operated in the way that it did in 1944-45.

Firstly, the War Office in London was increasingly aware by 1943 that the supply of replacements for the army was likely to start drying up by mid-to-late 1944 and that future campaigns and operations should in part be governed by this parameter. It was simply untenable to conduct operations against the enemy that risked heavy casualties; strenuous efforts would have to be made to limit losses where possible. Montgomery was fully aware of this problem and was informed that 21st Army Group would in effect become a wasting asset from the late summer of 1944 onwards. He would therefore have to incorporate this into his planning.⁴⁸

Second, Montgomery, like many other commanders in the British Army in the 1943-45 period, was concerned at the nature of his troops' attitude and stomach for a bitter campaign against the much more experienced and brutal German armed forces. Many British soldiers had never been in action prior to D-Day, were brought up in a liberal democracy that viewed with suspicion overt ideological motives, and thus supposedly lacked the drive

46. John A. English and Bruce I. Gudmundsson, *On Infantry* (Revised Edition) (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), pp. 112-13.

47. For example, see Mark Harrison, *Medicine and Victory: British Military Medicine in the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

48. UK NA WO 285/2, Montgomery to DCIGS Ronald Weeks, 19 March 1944; CAB 106/313, Montgomery to Weeks, 19 March 1944; LHMCA Liddell Hart 9/28/24, interview with Chester Wilmot, 18 May 1946.

and desire of their adversaries. Finally, they could no longer be ordered about without question as had their forefathers in the Great War due to the growth in the interwar years of "socialism" and anti-deferential attitudes. Quite simply, British commanders thought that their soldiers could do a good job, but blanched at the notion of putting them through too much pain for fear of a drop in morale. How accurate these views were, or to what extent they were governed by political viewpoints or were shaped by commanders' own experiences between 1914-1918, is only peripherally relevant here, but there is no doubt that Montgomery and his colleagues were to a degree influenced by such considerations. They therefore considered it vital that medical support, welfare, and decent food were available in order to maintain good morale in the army.⁴⁹ Montgomery also worked hard to reassure his troops that everything that could be reasonably done to keep losses down whilst achieving objectives would be done. In this he was quite successful; not all troops liked him, but many recognized that Monty was generally cautious and careful and unwilling to commit them to actions unless adequate preparations had been made.⁵⁰

Third, 21st Army Group's operations would be dictated and driven by the great superiority in resources enjoyed by the Allies by 1944 and by the obvious context that the British would be fighting as part of a grand coalition, most importantly the Americans, when confronting the Germans. The British Army's operations in Normandy and beyond could rely on the backing of lavish, though by no mean inexhaustible, supplies of war materiel, and methods of defeating the enemy could be shaped by this knowledge. With the ever-increasing strength of the U.S. forces in Northwest Europe, it made logical sense to shape British fighting methods to contribute to this collective force rather than as an isolated and separate arm; clearly it was not. The army might well have limited manpower, but it would have plenty of guns, tanks, trucks, fuel, ordnance, and all the other elements necessary for the conduct of modern military operations.⁵¹ As Brigadier Edgar "Bill" Williams, 21st Army Group's chief intelligence officer, put it:

We were always very aware of the doctrine, 'Let metal do it rather than

49. LHCMA Alanbrooke, 6/2/6, Wavell to Brooke, 31 May 1942 and Brooke to Wavell, 5 July 1942; LHCMA Alanbrooke 14/61/9 Montgomery to Brooke, 27 November 1942; LHCMA Allfrey 4/6, Lessons Learnt by 4th Armoured Brigade in Italy, September 1943. See also Gary Sheffield, "The Shadow of the Somme: The Influence of the First World War on British Soldiers' Perceptions and Behaviour in the Second World War," in Paul Addison and Angus Calder, eds., *Time to Kill: The Soldier's Experience of War in the West, 1939-1945* (London: Pimlico, 1997), pp. 29-39.

50. Captain Andrew Burn, 7th Armoured Division, interview with author, May 2002; Montgomery, *Memoirs*, p. 321; IWM BLM 41/5, "Some Notes on Morale in an Army," August 1943; see also Stephen Ashley Hart, *Montgomery and "Colossal Cracks": The 21st Army Group in Northwest Europe, 1944-45* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000).

51. WO 205/1165, Capt H B Wright RAMC and Capt R D Harkness RAMC, *A survey of casualties amongst armoured units in Northwest Europe*, No. 2 Operational Research Section, 21 Army Group 1945.

flesh'. We always said: 'Waste all the ammunition you like, but not lives'.⁵²

In addition, the British placed great emphasis on developing and maintaining a relatively efficient system for the delivery and transportation of supplies to the troops at the frontline, and operations would often only be countenanced if they could be properly supplied and resourced. Unlike the Germans, who were forced to operate in the hope that supplies would keep up with their needs, the British were determined to avoid excessive attrition due to such inadequate supply and support, resulting in logistical constraints determining the viability of operations.⁵³

Montgomery was also caught between two conflicting political dilemmas which help to explain the British Army's methods in 1944-45. First, it was imperative for Britain's international standing that the army reached the end of the campaign against Germany having made a crucial contribution to the victory: it would be inordinately difficult to sit alongside the USA and the USSR in any end-of-war conferences with a degree of equality if Britain, because of its weaknesses, had made a limited contribution to the fighting on the ground, forcing the Americans to shoulder still more of the burden.⁵⁴ Second, and perversely however, the British could not overextend themselves in the campaign and risk suffering unduly heavy losses. Indeed, to have reached the end of the war with a crippled and severely compromised army would simultaneously undermine their aspirations to parity at the conference table with their two larger partners, and hinder any prospects of regaining territories lost in Asia to the Japanese once the war in Europe had been concluded.⁵⁵

Under such pressures it fell to General Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Ronald "Bill" Adam, Adjutant General, and most particularly Montgomery, to match military methods to the political and strategic forces at play in the second half of the war, and it is against this backdrop that the success of the army must also be measured, rather than solely against theoretical doctrinal models. This context is fundamental in explaining the strategic, operational, and tactical techniques employed by the British in Northwest Europe in 1944-45 and in assessing their effectiveness.

The British were much better than their enemies at matching capability to

52. Interview with Brigadier Edgar Williams cited in Hastings, *Overlord*, p. 180.

53. LHCMA Allfrey 3/1, diary 17 January 1943; contrast Russell A. Hart, "Feeding Mars: The Role of Logistics in the German Defeat in Normandy, 1944," *War in History*, November 1996 with S. Hart, *Colossal Cracks*, chapter 4; Major J. Lee-Richardson, *21st Army Group Ordnance: The History of the Campaign in Northwest Europe 1944-5* (BAOR: 1946).

54. NA WO 259/77, Churchill to James Grigg, Secretary of State for War, 6 November 1943; NA PREM 3/342/5, Churchill to Grigg and Brooke, 6 November 1943.

55. IWM BLM 121, Churchill to Montgomery, 12 December 1944; Kenneth Strong, *Intelligence at the Top: The Recollections of an Intelligence Officer* (London: Cassell, 1968), p. 149; Montgomery, *Memoirs*, p. 332.

sustainability, and firepower was a key component of this, particularly artillery. As with the Great War, artillery was the biggest killer in World War II, but it was the British rather than the Germans who identified this and built a fearsome reputation for devastating firepower in the second half of the war. Operations were in large part determined by the availability of artillery support of sufficient concentration to suppress an enemy prior to an attack.⁵⁶ The Germans noted grimly the increased effects of British artillery and complained that the Allies seemed to be "waging war regardless of expense," what they named *materialschlacht*.⁵⁷ Additionally, the British identified air power and support as a crucial and potentially pivotal weapon in the land battle and endeavored to make it as powerful as possible. The British, like their Allies, viewed the battlefield holistically, not as a series of disconnected parts and the direct and integrated support of the RAF was as much part of the battle-winning team as any other component. Montgomery recorded that "all modern military operations are in fact combined army/air operations" and that air power was "a battle winning factor of the first importance."⁵⁸ It is spurious and fatuous to separate individually the components of the forces assembled to win a battle in order to demonstrate superiority in a particular area; it is the team, the effective results and how they fit together and contribute to overall strategic objectives that defines success. The British Army in Europe viewed the combined effects of firepower as the cornerstone of success and used it to dominate operations from 1942 onwards. In the 1944-45 campaign German commanders and troops reflected that they had been unable to operate effectively because the British and Canadians gripped the battlefield, strangled manoeuvre, and prevented concentration through the use of firepower, thus dictating the ebb and flow of the campaign.⁵⁹

Firepower drove the British Army's operational methods more and more as the war progressed and was central to the basic approach of dealing with the Germans in Northwest Europe in 1944-45. Montgomery preferred set piece operations in which his army's advantages in planning, intelligence, and resources could play a full role, and from his appointment as commander of 8th Army in 1942 he endeavored to impose this philosophy on his officers and troops.⁶⁰ Operations, after careful planning, employed heavy concentrations of firepower – artillery and air projected – to suppress

56. See J.B.A. Bailey, *Field Artillery and Firepower* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2003 – originally published 1989); Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham, *Fire-Power: British Army Weapons and Theories of War 1904-1945* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1982), pp. 245-78.

57. LHCMA Liddell Hart 15/15, CWP /43, Account of 2nd Panzer Division Operations 17 June – 7 July 1944, in 326th Infantry Division Report.

58. LHCMA, DGP/IV/2/10, *Air*; See Ian Gooderson, *Air Power at the Battlefield: Allied Close Air Support in Europe, 1943-45* (London: Frank Cass, 1998).

59. Basil Henry Liddell Hart, ed., *The Rommel Papers* (London: Collins, 1953), pp. 476-77, 484, 490-92.

60. S. Hart, *Colossal Cracks*, see chapter four.

the enemy preparatory to a steady advance of infantry and close-support armor behind a rolling artillery barrage. It was hoped that the enemy would be sufficiently disoriented to allow the advancing British soldiers to achieve their objectives with as few casualties as possible. Nevertheless, against a dug-in, determined enemy this proved only partially successful and British infantry and armor usually still had a stiff task in winking out the enemy, something at which they became increasingly more adept as the campaign progressed.⁶¹

Following the capture of the objective, the second half of the operation centered on defeating the obligatory German counterattack. German military doctrine recognized, quite correctly, that the optimum moment to recover lost ground was immediately after you have lost it and before the enemy could reorganize themselves and prepare their defense. Therefore, after any Allied advance that pushed the enemy back, the Germans would launch counterattacks, even when lacking good support and often in an uncoordinated fashion. The doctrine worked well enough until the Soviets and the Western Allies organized themselves to meet the counterattack and planned accordingly. The British always expected counterattacks and used heavy, proficient, and rapidly responsive artillery barrages to defeat them. Most importantly, heavy firepower was crushingly effective against an enemy that was moving, particularly in the open, and the counterattack, which naturally required the enemy to emerge from defensive and dug-in positions, was the precise moment to inflict such heavy losses. In the initial Allied advance, the artillery rarely inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy, though it served to suppress them; defeating counterattacks was the time when heavy attrition was inflicted on the Germans. Indeed, a weakness in German doctrine was its inflexibility in this case; it served little purpose to launch counterattacks against an enemy that lavishly supported its forces with heavy and highly responsive artillery, yet that is what the Germans continued to do in spite of their rapidly dwindling resources and mounting casualties. In this context, British operational methods, which might have appeared methodical rather than dynamic, broadly achieved their objectives: the Germans were gripped tightly and unable to exert influence beyond the tactical level; British loss rates in personnel for the whole campaign were smaller than expected; and the Germans were defeated.⁶²

The tactical inflexibility of the Germans also stands in sharp contrast to British methods which were *ad hoc* and much looser, though also prone to error. Although manuals and pamphlets were frequently distributed by the War Office throughout the war, all matters of doctrine were open to interpretation by commanding officers, providing they did not flagrantly

61. See the work on Anglo-Canadian artillery in Northwest Europe in the UK National Archives Operational Research holdings; WO 291, in particular AORG Section No. 7 "Lethality of Weapons" established in 1943.

62. National Archives, Canada, *Operational Policy – 2nd Canadian Corps*, 17 February 1944, RG 24, vol. 10797.

contradict the official view.⁶³ Commanders were expected to implement suggested doctrine flexibly and as appropriate to the local conditions; it was considered illogical for a central and predetermined doctrine to be applicable in all situations, especially when the British Army had such diverse roles and activities across the globe.⁶⁴ In a major industrial war such as the Second World War, this looseness was at times a great hindrance, as the army had no effective way of imposing a prescribed set of tactical doctrines universally across its formations, but it was by no means as moribund as has been previously suggested.⁶⁵

The British Army's flexible approach to doctrine actually proved to be useful in Northwest Europe because the previous experience gained by the army in the Mediterranean often proved inappropriate. Thus, when Montgomery's attempts to impose his tactical solutions from North Africa on 21st Army Group in early 1944 met with limited and patchy success, the result was that many units continued to employ existing methods, or had only incorporated some of the 8th Army's way of doing things by the time of D-Day.⁶⁶ When thrust into Northwest Europe in June 1944 they found that though their tactical doctrines were in need of some modification to suit the operating environment in Europe, they were culturally well equipped to solve such problems in theater and think on their feet. The army's culture of expecting commanders to seek solutions to problems worked relatively well in this situation as existing methods were tried, adapted, or rejected and new ideas implemented. New methods and organizations appeared for infantry armor cooperation, tank tactics, and infantry mobility in the first few weeks of the fighting, particularly apparent in VIII Corps during Operation BLUECOAT. Still further, the British and Canadians adapted quickly to the demands of the Scheldt Estuary campaign in the autumn of 1944.⁶⁷

The British Army's attitude to doctrine in the Second World War was hardly ideal and not one to be employed universally; it clearly reflected Britain's imperial past and was inappropriate for the Cold War in Europe. Yet, paradoxically, it worked to a significant extent in Northwest Europe in 1944 and allowed the British to think flexibly and to adapt to the situation,

63. UK NA WO 32/9834, DMT (Director of Military Training) to VCIGS, 6 November 1940.

64. IWM, General Staff, *The Training of an Infantry Battalion – Military Training Pamphlet no. 37* (London, 1940).

65. See John Buckley, "Tackling the Tiger: The Development of British Armoured Doctrine for Normandy 1944," *The Journal of Military History*, October 2010.

66. Timothy Harrison Place, *Military Training in the British Army, 1940-1944: From Dunkirk to D-Day* (London: Frank Cass, 2000) demonstrates some of these debates.

67. John Buckley, *British Armour in the Normandy Campaign 1944* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), chapter 4; Major General Roy Dixon, and Major Johnny Langdon, interviews with author, 2002; L.F. Ellis, *Victory in the West*, Vol. II, *The Defeat of Germany* (London: HMSO, 1968), chapters IV and V; Terry Copp, *Cinderella Army: The Canadians in Northwest Europe, 1944-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), chapters 4 and 5.

something the Germans found much harder due to both internal and external pressures.

Conclusion

The ebb and flow of historiographical trends is clearly in evidence in the debate over the reputation of the British Army in Northwest Europe in 1944-45. Despite their victory, the growth of admiration for the German Army, the demands of the Cold War, and the pressures of popular writing have served to undermine the army's achievement in defeating Hitler's forces. As ever in historical debate, vested self-interest was a factor in the development of the new orthodoxy that emerged by the 1980s: regard for one's historical reputation; personal vendetta; and absolution from responsibility on the part of academics, former Allies, and surviving enemy commanders being the most obvious examples.

History is often the study of context and understanding why groups or individuals acted in the way they did in the circumstances surrounding them. It is usually unhelpful and misleading to employ modern or current perspectives and attitudes to a historical scenario and expect this to offer solutions, either for understanding the past or indeed the present. This, however, is what has broadly happened to the reputation of the British Army in the Second World War. It has been measured against the inflated reputation of the German Army of the same period, a reputation which has been distorted and selectively studied since 1945: in effect the British Army has been criticized for not mirroring the Germans and too many historians have ignored or dismissed too readily the context of 1944-45.

The British Army was far from being a paragon of martial efficiency in 1944-45 and suffered from many shortcomings and weaknesses, as indeed did and do all military institutions, but given the political, strategic, and economic pressures playing on it, its approach to fighting the Northwest European campaign appears broadly rational. It sought to engage the Germans with its best attributes and capabilities shaping its operational and tactical methods, in the hope and expectation that these methods would conceal and mitigate its weaknesses; in this endeavour the British Army proved relatively successful. It made an important and vital contribution to the defeat of the Third Reich, and yet remained intact and functioning into 1945 having suffered tolerable casualties. It achieved this by employing increasingly workable and appropriate battle doctrines, and operational techniques which, though they required revisions and amendment, were broadly and eventually fit for purpose.⁶⁸ Such methods offered no realistic opportunity to the Germans for reversing the flow of the campaign.

In a purely theoretical world it is possible that the British Army could have fought the campaign in Northwest Europe differently, employing

68. As a recent example, see Charles Forrester, "Montgomery and His Legions: A Study of Operational Development, Innovation and Command in 21st Army Group, North-West Europe, 1944-45," Ph.D. thesis, University of Leeds, 2010.

bolder, riskier methods in an attempt to win faster. It may even be the case that such tactics would have brought about a speedier victory. Yet it made absolutely no sense to try, for any attempt to place such methods at the heart of 21st Army Group operations increased risk and offered the Germans a way of delivering stinging reverses to the British, something Montgomery dearly wanted to avoid.⁶⁹ By 1944 the British Army had a workable method of dealing with the Germans that minimized risk, limited casualties, and served to deliver victory within the strategic, political, economic, and social constraints of the time; it is in this context that the efforts and achievements of the British Army should be measured.

In the last fifteen years or so there have been signs of a revisionist movement, among academic historians at least, which has begun to challenge the 1980s orthodoxy. Stephen Hart's study of 21st Army Group's operational methods, *Montgomery and Colossal Cracks* (2000); David French's work on the British Army in World War II, *Raising Churchill's Army* (2000); and the present author's *British Armour in the Normandy Campaign 1944* (2004) and *Monty's Men: The British Army and the Liberation of Europe* (2013) have cast the army in a more favorable light, though still recognizing particular weaknesses.⁷⁰ The standing of Canadian and American performance has also been re-evaluated in Terry Copp's *Fields of Fire* (2003) and *Cinderella Army* (2006), Robert Engen's *Canadians Under Fire* (2009), and Michael Doubler's *Closing with the Enemy* (1994).⁷¹ Yet, in contrast, we have also had Hastings' *Armageddon* (2004) and Beevor's *D-Day* (2009) which have sold widely and maintained the 1980s orthodoxy. There is a long way to go before the standing of the British Army, particularly when compared to the still much vaunted and celebrated Germans, is considered more positively and most importantly in its historical context and not through the prism of post-war trends and prejudices.

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69. S. Hart, *Colossal Cracks*, chapter 2.

70. John Buckley, *Monty's Men: The British Army and the Liberation of Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

71. Michael D. Doubler, *Closing with the Enemy: How GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944-1945* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994).