



THE NORMANDY CAMPAIGN 1944: Sixty Years On.

By Mike Taylor

This two and a half day conference was held at Wolverhampton University from 1st to 3rd July 2004. Organised by our BCMH friend, Dr. John Buckley, Senior Lecturer in War Studies and History at Wolverhampton, it attracted some fifty delegates with an impressive geographical spread including America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Germany. The papers, almost all of high calibre, covered Deception and Intelligence, Allied Strategic Air Power, German Forces, Fighting the Campaign (ie: operational level analysis), the Experience of War, the Campaign in Retrospect and "Applied History" (ie: the relevance of battlefield tours to military education and to wider historical studies).

The opening paper set the tone for the conference. In his *"21st Army Group in Normandy: Towards a New Balance Sheet"*, Terry Copp took the thesis in his recent book (*FIELDS OF FIRE: The Canadians in Normandy*, Toronto, 2003) and questioned the stock analysis of the performance of the Allies in Normandy as poor, in particular the British and Canadians, and that of the Germans as significantly superior. He reminded us that this "inept" Allied Army had in fact successfully landed on a defended coast, then destroyed two powerful German Armies in just seventy-six days. While recognising shortcomings, particularly in relation to poor performance of Allied armour, he questioned the prominence given hitherto to the "brute force" explanation of the Allied victory and the emphasis placed on materiel, reserves, artillery and air power. The decisiveness of the latter has been questioned for some time, particularly close tactical air support, but he raised similar queries about artillery. Regarding forces ratios, he pointed out that the planners knew from the outset that on the Anglo-Canadian flank at least there was simply insufficient force ever to achieve the necessary superiority for a decisive victory. Nevertheless, this flank did succeed in capturing the attention of the German command and did succeed in "writing down" the principal German forces in the theatre. This success, Copp maintained, was the result of learning lessons faster and adapting fighting methods more quickly than their opponents. As an example, he cited the German insistence on the immediate counter-attack when experience indicated that in the circumstances it was a suicidal doctrine. In relation to doctrine, he also queried whether the British failure to apply a coherent centralised tactical doctrine was in fact a hindrance rather than providing a liberating framework in which commanders at all levels were enabled to find ways of achieving their aims according to the prevailing situation.

Other presentations to a significant extent followed this lead. On deception and intelligence, John Ferris made the point that Intelligence probably had little effect on the basic invasion plan. Similarly, much of the detailed planning was based not on actual Intelligence but on worst-case scenarios. The assessment remained that the Germans could still be defeated. The generally-held views on the efficacy of FORTITUDE were also challenged. Frank Stetch, from what is apparently a strategic analysis body called the Mitre Corporation, deconstructed the various deception plans in a way that would have put a John Le Carré plot to shame. Another BCMH friend,



Kathy Barbier, wondered just what effect the deception plans actually had on the disposition of German forces in Normandy. She drew attention to the fact that most if not all their infantry divisions capable of movement and some level of operational manoeuvre were in fact shifted south before the breakout and most of what remained north were static formations. There were fewer surprises regarding the question of air power, where the received wisdom of air commanders fighting their own war survived almost unscathed. Seb Cox, however, - as ever - managed to put a new (to me at least) slant on Harris when he pointed out that his resistance to direct support of OVERLORD lasted only up to the time when Bomber Command came under command of SHAEF on 14 April 1944. Thereafter, until August when SHAEF relinquished command, he received just one clear directive and had the freedom to apply his force as he saw fit to achieve it. This was in contrast to the previous situation where he received around two directives a month, often conflicting. Harris saw his time under SHAEF as the best in his time in command, and Eisenhower was not alone among senior commanders in praising him for keen and pro-active co-operation.

The papers on the operational level were equally stimulating and challenging. Steve Badsey proposed that the successful Allied landings were something of a fluke. The Germans had failed to reconcile the debate on forward or depth defence, an error exacerbated by the triple failure of the Luftwaffe, the Kriegsmarine and the Abwehr to anticipate the invasion. Given the postponement they might reasonably have been expected to have enjoyed at least twelve hours warning. Following the landings their command then failed successively to understand that Cherbourg was not the main effort (leading to failures in deploying adequate counters to the British and Canadian landings) and the significance of MULBERRY. David Benest offered a critique of the British Airborne landings and made a good case for there being a failure to grasp essential airborne operational concepts and even the significance of the terrain. Their success was, therefore, flawed and probably more expensive than it need have been. Peter Gray chose CHARNWOOD to demonstrate the shortcomings of the key concept of effects-based operations (defining the desired effect primarily in terms of the number and type of bombs used) which underlay the use of strategic air in aid of ground forces. John Buckley drew on his recent book (BRITISH ARMOUR IN THE NORMANDY CAMPAIGN 1944, Frank Cass, 2004) and identified and analysed three criticisms levelled at the British forces: inappropriate doctrine, inadequate equipment and only moderate morale. On the first, he offered the view that the initial concept of narrow front assaults, echeloned in depth with massive fire support was not conducive to the kind of armoured break-throughs that many expected. However, by learning on the ground, the armoured divisional structure was re-shaped in mid campaign and infantry-armour co-operation

improved, facilitated, he argued, by the non-rigid doctrinal policy of the British Army, thus echoing one of Terry Copp's points. The inadequacy of equipment point was less contentious but as regards the claimed lack of morale, he had found no substantiating evidence. His research had led him to believe that when the resources were appropriate to the task, there were few morale problems. Terry Copp had made a



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Page 3 / 3

similar comment when discussing the (mis)perception of failure by 51st Highland Division in the bridgehead battles.

The conference was characterised for me by concepts familiar for many years to WW1 historians and can be summed up by "learning curve". The phrase "bite and hold" was even in evidence in criticising some of the more ambitious British plans, such as GOODWOOD. Gary Sheffield has been saying for some time that the study of WW2 is at about the stage WW1 studies were some 20 years ago, and to me this conference demonstrated that point in spades. Orthodoxies are being questioned by historians no longer prepared to build on previous work without going back to primary sources, and the nature of the sources being consulted is changing, with a move away from the command level to an analysis of operational records. Revisionism is thus alive and well and breathing new life into WW2 military history. Stephen Hart summed it up well when he said that the future lay in building islands of operational analysis preparatory to making connections between them for a re-orientation of our understanding. It was a delight to have been present at a formative event in that process.