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Peter Rostron *The Military Life and Times of General Sir Miles Dempsey, Monty's Army Commander*, Pen & Sword 2010 ISBN 978 1 84884 252 6 £19.99 pp212

'He has remained a somewhat shadowy figure and a General almost completely unknown to the general public.' The quote from Horrocks is apposite. And the point is reinforced by the need for the subtitle, explaining to that public just who this Miles Dempsey was.

On first hearing that an attempt was being made to compose a biography of Dempsey, this reviewer was somewhat sceptical. It is widely rumoured that others have set out on the path, only to be thwarted by a dearth of material. Could Rostron do any better?

A first contact was encouraging. Challenged to explain Dempsey's enigmatic soubriquet of *'Bimbo'*, Rostron revealed the fruits of his research. No, he did not have an answer. (*'Its provenance has never been explained, but since it seems to lie in some mildly embarrassing incident in Dempsey's past, perhaps this is not surprising.'*) But his study did appear to have exhausted a wide range of sources; and on the positive side of the balance, had revealed more widely used nicknames: *'Dimmer'* within the general's own regiment; *'Lucky'* following his successful command of both 13 Brigade and XIII Corps; and - most endearingly - the conflation of his initials and First World War decoration into *'Emsy Dempsey Emsy'*.

This is a good and a useful book. Hitherto, the best material on Dempsey that this reviewer had found was in Stephen Hart's important *'Colossal Cracks'* of 2000¹ and Dempsey's own diary, especially his *'First 100 Days'*² (2). Both these necessarily focus on Dempsey's role during the Normandy campaign. Rostron's work is complementary to both: attempting an analysis of a personality who was self-effacing to the point of transparency. As one of Rostron's contributors affirms: *'He disliked publicity. He shrank from anything that seemed like self-advertisement. He would not tolerate any notion of flamboyant anniversaries of his Army's achievements.'*³ The analysis succeeds. Taken together, Rostron's narrative biography and Hart's study of 2nd Army leadership cover a difficult subject well. (Rostron cites Hart's assistance in his Preface.)

Rostron's military qualifications are impressive. Educated at Clifton and London University, he joined the Gloucestershire Regiment in 1964 and rose to command First Battalion. He subsequently served in Special Branch, as a Defence Attaché, an instructor at Staff College, and has been an International Fellow of the United States War College.

Nevertheless, Rostron himself had little knowledge of Dempsey before commencing this project: *'I suspect I shared my ignorance with the great majority... little had ever been written either by or about him... No biography had ever been written, largely because of the lack of source material.'* But unique access to the Dempsey Family Collection has provided a wealth of material with which, in combination with the judgements of a great many well-

¹ Stephen Hart, *'Montgomery and "Colossal Cracks": the 21st Army Group in Northwest Europe, 1944-45*, Praeger, 2000, ISBN 0-275-96162-1 also in Stackpole paperback

² Miles Dempsey, *The First Hundred Days*, National Archives Kew, WO 285/9

³ Selwyn-Lloyd, in the work being reviewed p 160



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placed contemporaries of Dempsey, to paint a coherent and convincing picture of the man against a canvas of the familiar narrative of two world wars.

As familiarity grew, the biographer clearly warmed to his subject. Early in the story, Dempsey is already ‘a first-class professional who could exert tact and charm with a steely determination to get the job done.’ And so it goes on. The praise is not entirely unrelenting, although even some of Dempsey’s reported mistakes are immediately followed by examples of his self-effacing willingness to apologise. (*‘The men were called back and Dempsey made a handsome apology’*; also *‘Dempsey apologized handsomely, Broadhurst accepted that the apology was a tribute to Dempsey’s fairness.’*) A cynic might observe that, with so little precedent, the author is free to present his subject as a paragon without needing to attempt a more critical or revisionist approach. Nevertheless, to this reader at least, much of the (almost) unalloyed praise seems fair, especially since so much of it comes from colleagues and subordinates with little personal axe to grind.

Some criticism of Dempsey, and much interesting detail, comes with September 1944. Rostron argues (pages 135-136) that Montgomery’s decision to strike north to Arnhem (and the V2 bases) rather than east to the Ruhr was decisively influenced by ‘a signal from London’ (tantalizingly not identified). Thus, *‘If he [Dempsey] had one great failing in the whole story that is Arnhem, it was that he did not stand up to Montgomery and argue the case against Arnhem.’* No less tantalizing (nor referenced) is mention of an earlier incident in which Montgomery received, *‘a most unusual letter from O’Connor, which appeared to question the judgement of O’Connor’s superior officer, Dempsey.’* This, apparently, the occasion of which O’Connor’s own biographer wrote: *‘Many years later, he [O’Connor] felt that he should have pressed the matter more forcefully with Dempsey, who appears to have acted rather stupidly on this occasion.’*⁴ Then of course there was Patton, reported by Rostron to be, *‘not impressed by Dempsey, who [sic] he took to be a “yes man”;*’ but then, *‘Given Patton’s inability to find anything very favourable to say about any British commander... this judgement need not be given too much weight.’*

Where the personal material is necessarily thin, the author successfully bridges gaps with good, general accounts of wider events. On some technical matters (e.g., the description of Hobart’s ‘funnies’ on pages 85-86) he wisely avoids the trap of venturing into levels of technical detail to which so many ill-prepared authors succumb. This is after all the ‘big picture’, appropriate to a biography of a high-level commander.

That is not to say that the book is always strictly accurate on matters of detail. Though it is perhaps tedious to be picky, a few examples can be shown. There is mention of a ‘50th Panzer Division’ unknown to this reviewer (page 47); it is surprising that so experienced a British officer refers more than once to the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders as ‘Argyles’; and ‘Operation FORTITUDE NORTH’ is repeatedly cited where SOUTH would have been correct. Later on, eyebrows might well be raised at the assertion that Guards Armoured failed to prevent the enemy blowing the vital bridge ‘at Nijmegen’! These and similar slips suggest occasional reliance on uncorroborated sources. But they do not detract from the value of the

⁴ John Baynes, *The Forgotten Victor*, Brassey’s, 1989, page 205, ISBN 0-08-036269-9



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work overall. Nor the fact that Rostron's account of Operation EPSOM (page 105) is rather muddled, both in sequence as well as detail: the Odon river banks were *not* extensively wired or mined; and it was a signal feature of German tactics that the Odon bridges were *never* (as claimed) destroyed. If Rostron is rather confused about EPSOM, so too are many others who have yet to read this reviewer's book on the subject⁵.

On the other hand, the specific detail of Rostron's principal subject is convincing and often revealing. This reviewer was not aware that Dempsey systematically embarked on a mind-expanding course of Pelmanism early in his military career. Familiar though we are with the Normandy commanders' concerns about the distractions of VIP visits, it is illuminating that as the battle raged, Dempsey felt the need to detach a staff officer to London to procure a lobster for H M The King's luncheon at 2nd Army HQ on 16 June. At the personal level, Dempsey's sincere Christianity becomes an important consideration. All the more so since it was a quality '*which appealed deeply to Montgomery – a proper sense of religious truth.*' Rostron also succeeds in presenting typically short, pithy, and expressive pen-portraits of individuals. The image of Brooke sweeping the ranks of the Army '*like an avenging angel*' seems particularly apt.

Some controversial topics are unavoidable. One such is the issue of Montgomery's unlikely claim to have foreseen all eventualities and stuck to a master plan without deviation. Perhaps reflecting Dempsey's own loyalty to the boss, Rostron's subject is quoted as supporting the Montgomery stance: '*He [Monty] never wavered in his determination from this policy.*' The quote is referenced to a conversation with Liddell Hart, but unfortunately the reference is not dated so without seeking the original document the reader cannot judge how much hindsight is involved. (In fairness, Rostron does also confess Montgomery's '*inability to admit he was ever wrong.*') Nor are we given a date for Dempsey's important statement, '*I never expected 3 Div to get Caen on the first day, and I always said that if we didn't get it on the first day it would take a month to get it afterwards.*' However great one's respect for Dempsey's foresight, if such truly was his view before 6 June, it would be reassuring to have some corroboration.

Even with a figure as respected as Dempsey, knowing the date of such assertions allows one to 'aim off', to make allowance for years of hindsight. Elsewhere (pages 132 and 150) Rostron confidently quotes the rather cynical views of a Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry tanker published in 2002 citing, '*this kind of guff from on high*' (i.e., from Dempsey). Right or wrong, it is salutary to contrast the relevant regimental history, published a half-century closer to events in 1952, which reflects no such sentiments. Equally, it would be revealing to know just how long after the event Dempsey made his statement that '*the distance of the DZs from the [Arnhem] bridge was of course fatal.*'

Stephen Hart has explored the question of Dempsey's being repeatedly 'short circuited' by Montgomery. On this point, Rostron's view may be equivocal, but in the end appears perfectly reasonable. He offers mild criticism of Monty's tendency to '*command "two" and even "three down" if he thought it appropriate.*' This, be it noted from a highly experienced

⁵ Ian Daglish *Over the Battlefield, Operation Epsom*, Pen & Sword 2007 ISBN 978 1 84415 562 0



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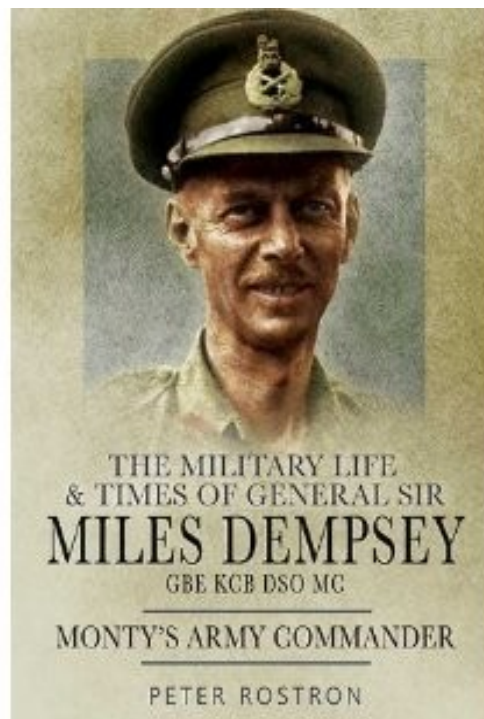
Page 4 / 5

professional soldier. But Rostron exonerates Montgomery, citing a mutual empathy. Dempsey issued plans, after discussing them in detail with Montgomery. Monty in turn might give orders, or 'advice', directly to lower formations, but generally only after coming to broad understanding with Dempsey over the issues. And whatever the case, it is suggested that the partnership between Montgomery and Dempsey was one of mutual respect, despite occasional appearances of usurpation of authority. Just perhaps, as Rostron suggests, Montgomery really did recognise in Dempsey, '*certain personal qualities that were the opposite of his own.*' In the end, for Rostron, '*It worked and that is as much as need be said.*'

Rostron rightly points out that, for all his unquestioned abilities, Dempsey had a streak of luck. Given different vagaries of fate, his place might well have been taken by Leese, O'Connor, Gott, or another. Nevertheless, Rostron cites Horrocks's doubt as to whether anyone else at all could have worked so harmoniously or so successfully with Montgomery while subject to the unrelenting strain of directing an Army headquarters throughout so vital a campaign.

In summary: this is a useful work filling a long-standing gap, marred only by some details which might have benefited from more rigorous editing. Otherwise, this book is recommended to anyone seeking hitherto unavailable insights into the character of an important British general.

Ian Darglish





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