

The Enduring Paradox: How the Duke of Marlborough Succeeded and Faltered in the War of the Spanish Succession.

A Monograph

by

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Abstract

The Enduring Paradox: How the Duke of Marlborough Succeeded and Faltered in the War of the Spanish Succession, by MAJ Gordon W Muir, British Army, 59 pages.

The Duke of Marlborough's campaign in 1711 during the War of the Spanish Succession encapsulated many of the key concepts of war and warfare. Long before their enshrinement in doctrine, Marlborough used strategy, operational art and key tenets of tactical action, such as mission command and command of the moral realm, to great success. He was never defeated militarily. However, the war ended in the failure of the Grand Alliance's war aim to prevent a Bourbon taking the throne of Spain, and Great Britain brokered a unilateral peace, contrary to the wishes of the wider coalition. The campaign in 1711, and the previous nine years of war, evince the necessity for all military commanders to be aware of the limitations the character of warfare places upon objectives, the need to cultivate strategic leaders and the importance of political-military dialogue. Lessons from 1711 that endure to this day. The Duke of Marlborough was a great commander and his successes had considerable historical benefits for Great Britain; yet even he faltered in the face of the enduring paradox between policy and its flow down to tactical action.

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Introduction

He achieved all that military power can achieve; he destroyed the offensive potential of a great power by defeating its armies in whatever they attempted; he conquered the Duchy of Bavaria and the provinces of the Spanish Netherlands by exploiting the strategic opportunities secured by his victories in battle; however, his military genius was not, and could not be, sufficient to make up for the political and military failure of the Allies to win the entire kingdom of Spain.

- Ivor F. Burton. *The Captain General*

The Duke of Marlborough was a commander for the ages. For ten campaigns during the War of the Spanish Succession, stretching from 1702 to 1711, he was never defeated on the field of battle. The Duke of Marlborough blended tactical excellence with strategic cognizance. At the end of the campaign in 1711, his victories put England on the verge of victory and it ended the war greatly advantaged. However, the war concluded in the Duke of Marlborough's disgrace and a unilateral peace brokered by Great Britain. For all his acumen, and perhaps hypercritically, the Duke failed. The campaign of 1711 demonstrates how all three of the concepts of strategy, operational art and tactical action played their role in this conclusion.

While much has changed in the conduct of warfare and Marlborough was undoubtedly a product of his time, the lessons of his campaigns endure. The reasons the Duke remains relevant are attributable to two factors. First, the persistent relationship between war and politics, and Marlborough's appreciation and application of what has since been termed operational art. Marlborough was more than a general and wielded greater power than many of today's generals; however, due to England's burgeoning representative political control, this power was always constrained and at risk. He was not a Napoleon or Frederick; absolute ruler and military commander. Therefore, his role in the dialogue with political leaders, creating a strategy and the employment of military means in their pursuit is worthy of analysis. Second, the Duke of Marlborough's traits in command and his skillful tactical and operational employment of military forces is pertinent in the contemporary world. Joint, multinational operations subservient to

evolving political aims in a multitude of theaters, with worldwide consequences, are not modern or emerging phenomena. The Duke of Marlborough dealt with these considerations continuously in the War of the Spanish Succession.

Marlborough's achievements also set him apart. He helped change the power landscape of Europe and was instrumental in the emergence of Great Britain as a preeminent force globally. However, his fame is arguably not commensurate with his achievements. This is due, to an extent, to his controversial character, the sully of his name during and after the war, and the passage of time. At the end of his last campaign in 1711, Marlborough was dismissed from command and effectively exiled shortly thereafter. The unilateral peace brokered by England, contrary to Marlborough's wishes and those of the multinational coalition, meant that the Duke ultimately failed, despite his evident abilities. How, therefore, did he falter in the War of the Spanish Succession? ¹

The background, and progress, of the War of the Spanish Succession set the all-important context to the campaign of 1711. English motivations for war, the balance of power in Europe, alliance intricacies, and colonial aspirations all played their role in the outbreak and continuation of war. In addition, the domestic situation in England, in particular the characteristics of accountability and subservience to political masters were vital and enable modern comparisons. Furthermore, the formative experiences of John Churchill, First Duke of Marlborough, greatly affected his formation of strategy, operational artistry, and execution of tactical action. For strategy, it is the linkage and relationship between policy and the creation of a military strategy. In terms of operational art, it is how Marlborough took the strategy in 1711 and applied it to his

¹ "More perhaps than any other man, Marlborough was the architect of the marvelous edifice of England's greatness;" Archibald Alison, *The Life of the Duke of Marlborough*, vol. 2. 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1860), 435.

operations in Flanders. Finally, for the tactical, it was Marlborough's use of what is today termed mission command and his command of the moral realm. Marlborough's skill and ability in these three areas have enduring, contemporary relevance.²

Definition of Terms

During the War of the Spanish Succession, the Acts of Union formed Great Britain in 1707. Many authors discussing this period interchange England and Great Britain. The use of England meant Great Britain in many authors' works, even if used after 1707, and it is widely accepted. For ease and to prevent contradictions between quoted works and this analysis, England will be used throughout, except for in the conclusion. It must be noted, however, that the campaign in 1711 was on behalf of Great Britain and the make-up of the English contribution to the army Marlborough commanded was British from the outset.³

Marlborough's operations centered upon Flanders, an area which encompassed what is now the Netherlands, Belgium, and Northern France. At the time this area was called the Spanish Netherlands. Both terms are used, but predominantly Flanders. The Netherlands itself was the United Provinces or Dutch Republic. In addition, Prince Eugene's campaigns will be referred to as taking place in Italy, even though the state did not exist. Any use of the term Peninsula, refers to the Iberian Peninsula. The map below depicts Europe at the outbreak of the war.

² Four levels impact and define military action in the UK currently: National Strategic, the policy level and where the objectives of the state can be found; Military Strategic; Operational; and Tactical. The Royal College of Defence Studies, *Thinking Strategically*. (Shrivenham, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom: Government Stationary Office, October 2010), 6.

³ Field Marshall Lord Carver, *The Seven Ages of the British Army* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984), 58: "He had done more than any other man to create the British regular army." A result of his attention to training and the organization of his forces.

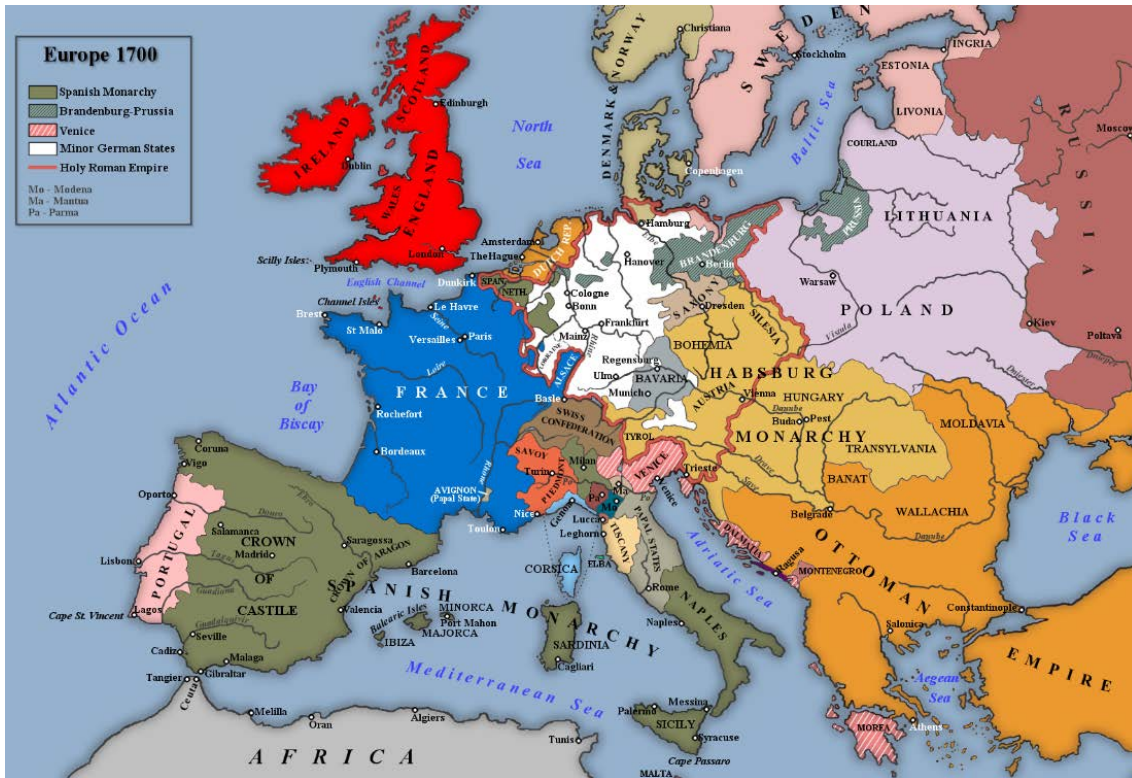


Figure 1. Europe in 1700

Source: Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org>, accessed February 10, 2016.

The War of the Spanish Succession reenergized the Grand Alliance. England’s actions are the focal point; however, the United Provinces and Austria, ruled by the Habsburgs, were the other two main players in the alliance. The Grand Alliance also consisted of several German states: Brandenburg-Prussia; Hanover; Saxony; Baden; and the Palatinate. In addition, Portugal joined the Alliance after the war commenced.

Scope and Limitations

The War of the Spanish Succession covered several theaters and it was, in many ways, a world war. Marlborough’s campaigns and that of 1711 were in Northern Europe, Flanders predominantly, although it is impossible to discount the events in the Peninsula or in Italy. In addition, the Duke of Marlborough’s successes were numerous and his campaigns covered almost

every aspect of warfare of his time.⁴

There was the slow maneuvering without battle in 1702, the tremendous success at Blenheim in 1704, the sieges, Lille is of particular note, and the bloodshed at Malplaquet. The campaign of 1711 is one of his lesser known years of campaigning, much of the literature concentrates on Blenheim and Ramillies for example. However, it is one of the most interesting. Marlborough had campaigned for nine years, he suffered the changing political landscape and the effects this was having on operations. His personal, as well as his political, power was diminished. Yet, he still accomplished a great deal, reaping the dividends of preceding campaigns to great effect. It was also his last campaign, and one where his role more closely resembled that of a modern commander.

Nevertheless, there are several limitations to studying the Duke of Marlborough. He was a product of his time; of an apprenticeship in royal court and a beneficiary of advantages simply not relevant today. The unique features of the epoch do limit some of Marlborough's utility; however, human influences and interaction as well as political machinations are eternal in nature. The most important limitation is in the interpretation of his experiences and inferring any relevance they may have today. Warfare has changed considerably, not least in the scale, technology and resources available. Consequently, there will be no discussion of tactics nor on the equipment of the army.

⁴ George Macaulay Trevelyan, *England Under Queen Anne: Blenheim* (London: Longmans, Green, 1948), 413-415; Brendan Simms, *Three Victories and a Defeat: The Rise and Fall of the First British Empire* (Philadelphia: Perseus, 2007), 50.

The Context to 1711

The Prelude to War

As the eighteenth century began, Europe was under the thrall of Louis XIV and his dynastic, Catholic ambitions. Late-seventeenth-century successes had not sated his appetite for conquest, and the childless Charles II of Spain presented a further opportunity for an expansion of his power. The Nine Years War had just concluded in 1697, and left much unresolved. The United Provinces still faced the real threat of French invasion despite the barrier of the Spanish Netherlands. Furthermore, England and William were under no illusions that this was a peace that would hold. The succession to Charles II's vacant Spanish throne shattered this peace five years later.

England underwent great change in the late seventeenth century. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 put England on a path to war with France. The seizure of power by William to ensure the Protestant succession to the Catholic, King James II of England, replaced a regime financed and supported by Louis XIV, with a hostile one.⁵ The overthrow of James II lay in Louis XIV's persecution of Protestants. Louis's revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, which removed the right of Protestants to worship and led to their expulsion from France, exemplified this discrimination. Before 1688, James II's heir was his daughter, Mary, who was a Protestant married to William of Orange, the Dutch leader of the United Provinces. In 1688, however, King James's second wife gave birth to a son, James Francis Edward Stuart, who took precedence in the succession to his father over his much older half-sister, and who was going to be brought up

⁵ "England became, in a short time, and for many years remained, in effect, a dependency upon the French crown – bought by its gold, obedient to its dictation and subservient to its interests." James W Gerard, *The Peace of Utrecht* (New York: G.P Putnam and Sons, 1886), 11, 12.

as a Catholic. This alarmed the Protestant majority in England. The birth of this male heir threw the Protestant succession of the English throne into grave jeopardy. This was an eventuality that both the majority of the Houses of Parliament, and the English population, refused to countenance. The Glorious Revolution ensued and William and Mary were crowned joint rulers in 1689. The Nine Years War broke out shortly thereafter. During its course, William defeated James II and Louis XIV's forces at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, preventing a Catholic revival. However, with a Catholic heir resident in exile at Versailles, the possibility of a Catholic retaking the English throne did not dissipate during this period. The end of the Nine Years War shifted the focus to the childless King of Spain.

Europe was war weary after the Nine Years War and an agreement to deal with the implications of succession in Spain, due to the absence of an heir, followed in October 1698, and became known as the First Partition Treaty. England, France, Austria and the United Provinces of the Netherlands were the signatories, which, including territorial agreements, would see the partition of some of Spain's overseas territories to France and Austria, and the throne would be placed in the hands of the Electoral Prince of Bavaria, a five year old. This compromise between the major powers ignored both Louis XIV's and the Habsburg claimants. The first Treaty's success was short-lived. The leaking of the Treaty's conditions, which called for a loss of Spanish territories, was a slight, dividing the kingdom of a still alive Charles, and caused outrage in Spain. The passing soon after of the five-year old Elector was its death knell. The Second Partition Treaty was required, which bequeathed the Spanish throne to Archduke Charles of the Habsburgs, who remained the favored allied candidate throughout the war.⁶

⁶ Archibald Alison, *The Life of the Duke of Marlborough*, vol. 1, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1860), 35-40; Frank Taylor, *Marlborough's Wars: 1702 – 1707* (Leonaux, 2010), 36-38; Gerard, *The Peace of Utrecht*, 54-62.

A key clause of The Second Partition Treaty contained the war aim of the Allies: “the sovereignty of Spain and its Indian possessions should never appertain to any prince who should be, at the same time Emperor or King of the Romans, or either King or Dauphin of France.”⁷ The religious struggle is highlighted frequently by many sources. However, religion was not the only, nor overriding consideration. Alliances were made irrespective of religious beliefs, rooted in power and, as illustrated by the “or either” clause, considerations of maintaining the balance of power were more pertinent for the Grand Alliance, albeit cloaked in religious concerns.

The balance of power in Europe at this time was delicate and English involvement in the war was not solely due to religion. There were economic factors, such as the *asiento* and right to trade slaves: “For if his Empire [King of Spain] as a whole fell under French domination, English commerce and manufacture and the Dutch carrying trade would be fatally injured.”⁸ However, more importantly, according to Brendan Simms, was that the defense of England rested in the security of Flanders. Simms counters the religious justification for war, highlighting both how homeland defense and balance of power considerations were paramount for England.

The War of the Spanish Succession had historical precedent and was, in many ways, a continuation of the Tudor period which recognized the need for the Flanders and Dutch coasts to remain secure and out of the “hands of one power.” This was the key to both the defense of England and its naval power. The notion of Protestant interest, therefore, “was from the beginning a primarily political and strategic concept, and it lost most of its overtly theological content as time went by.” That Louis was Catholic undoubtedly contributed to war motivations, however, it was the avoidance of a “universal monarchy” in Europe which England sought. To do

⁷ Gerard, *The Peace of Utrecht*, 65.

⁸ Trevelyan, *England Under Queen Anne: The Peace and the Protestant Succession* (London: Longmans, Green, 1948), 123.

so, the barrier of Flanders and the “German Protestant bastions which shielded England’s inner line of defence” could not be allowed to fall to Louis, as they represented the “counterscarp” of England’s defenses. To prevent their loss, the balance of power in Europe had to be kept. After William came to the throne, England effectively became the “guardian” of this balance. England in the war acted to oppose the French as it threatened to gain a “position of predominance” in the European system which threatened English liberties, trade and very existence.⁹

The Flanders barrier was equally vital to the Dutch. The Dutch were neighbors of France, protected by the barrier and an intricate system of fortresses and dykes. Without the Channel to protect it, Dutch concerns at French hegemonic aspirations were far more immediate than England’s. The fortresses and rivers provided protection, and were manned by a professional army, well trained though smaller than its French counterparts. Furthermore, its mindset was inherently defensive: protection and security of Dutch territory was paramount. The Dutch actions during the war must be viewed through this lens. The United Provinces were also Protestant and viewed the persecution enacted by the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and encroachment in the German provinces to the east by Louis, as an existential threat. Correspondingly, their contribution to the war effort was significant in terms of men and materiel. Although governed by the States-General, the most important figure was the Grand Pensionary Antonie Heinsius. As Richard Holmes discusses, the close relationship between Marlborough and Heinsius became vital for the success of the war and alliance.¹⁰

France was the major threat to the Dutch, and indeed to Europe. It was a united country

⁹ Simms, *Three Victories and a Defeat*, 16-18, 45, 48-49; Morton A Kaplan, “System and Process in International Politics,” in “Balance-of-Power Thinking from the Renaissance to the French Revolution,” *Journal of Peace Research* 1, no. 2 (1964): 127, 120-136.

¹⁰ Trevelyan, *England Under Queen Anne: Blenheim*, 105; Richard Holmes, *Marlborough: Britain’s Greatest General* (London: Harper Perennial 2008), 201.

of 20 million people, in possession of the strongest army in Europe, viewed as invincible by its competitors, and ruled by an expansionist, glory-seeking king. Already the strongest state in Europe, control of Spain would give access to the “financial and military resources of the Spanish Empire.” French power, already dominant, would become overwhelming, controlling sea trade routes to the Mediterranean and Latin America. John Lynn discusses Louis’s personal quest for “*gloire*” and how it manifested itself in increasing French power and prestige, chiefly through war. However, in contrast to the predominant Catholic expansionist narrative of the Grand Alliance, Lynn also suggests that Louis’s motivations for war, although certainly dynastic, were also defensive in nature. Louis sought to secure France’s borders rather than merely expand its territories. Nevertheless, union with Spain would leave continental Europe at France’s mercy. The fate of Spain, therefore, needed to be settled.¹¹

The Second Partition Treaty met the same fate as its predecessor. With all powers aware, the second iteration was subject to great intrigue. Those who favored the Bourbon claimant in Spain, recognizing that the treaty would see the dismembering of its Empire, wanted to protect the integrity of its territories. France was the only nation that could secure this. The dying Charles, ultimately bequeathed the throne in his will to Philip, Duke of Anjou. Louis XIV’s grandson now had the throne in his grasp and France’s strategic position became “exorbitant.”¹²

Subsequently, diplomacy sought to prevent war. As Trevelyan discusses, war was not inevitable, but became so, irrespective of the religious justifications or whether Louis was defensively minded “by the interpretation which Louis put upon [Charles’s will] in the following

¹¹ Taylor, *Marlborough’s Wars*, 60; John A Lynn, *The Wars of Louis XIV 1667 – 1714* (Essex, UK: Longman, 1999), 27-30, 266-270.

¹² Gerard, *The Peace of Utrecht*, 77-79; Taylor, *Marlborough’s Wars*, 61.

months.”¹³ The Dutch appealed to the English after aggressive French troop movements in Flanders saw the dissolution of the barrier. Louis XIV would arguably not have undertaken this course of action if he believed he would face consequences. He did not fear Austria, nor could the Dutch, postured defensively, mount any semblance of a threat to France’s plans. England was key. However, in his actions Louis played a dangerous game of brinkmanship and misperceived the response. The English domestic political scene faced a choice. William was able to declare war, as other rulers could, but he could not manage a war effectively without the financial and political support of Parliament. This was a result of the unique, burgeoning, English representative parliamentary system at this time.

The State of England

The English political scene meant that the Duke of Marlborough was subservient to political masters and formed only part of an intricate and comprehensive policy formulation. George Macaulay Trevelyan states, in a discussion of whether the War of the Spanish Succession should continue, that “such questions are decided in a well-governed country, by the civil power, and it is the just boast of England that ever since 1660 the civil power has been supreme.”¹⁴ It was not just the continuation of war that needed its approval, but the declaration as well. The acts

¹³ “[Through] seizing the Dutch Barrier, by showing that he regarded the Spanish Netherlands as French territory, by excluding the English merchants from the American trade, and by treating the Spanish Empire as a prize for French commercial exploitation and a field of manoeuvre for French armies.” Trevelyan, *England Under Queen Anne: The Peace and the Protestant Succession*, 134-135.

¹⁴ “Marlborough would not have been England’s greatest leader in war if he had not understood the necessary relation between her war effort and her civil constitution....he must answer for all he did to the Commons of England.” Trevalyan, *England Under Queen Anne: Blenheim*, 148, 134.

of Louis XIV bridged the division between the two political factions; Whigs and Tories. Further to his actions in Flanders, he, in what Correlli Barnett describes as “one of the more notable achievements of Louis XIV’s statecraft,” recognized the Catholic heir to the English throne. This blatant threat to the Protestant succession ultimately united all in England save a “small minority of Jacobites.” It was: “a distinct and public declaration of war, not only against the reigning monarch, but against the established religion of Great Britain.” English public opinion and politics were for war and subsequently, “parliamentary authorization for war was sought and obtained,” showing the relative unity and also strength of the political system at the time.¹⁵

However, the death of William in March 1702 plunged the Grand Alliance into turmoil. A corollary of which was the true emergence of John Churchill. The period in which the Duke of Marlborough lived lent itself to grand figures with great power that is almost inconceivable today in a modern democracy. After the death of William, Marlborough was “virtually master of England” during the war according to Winston Churchill.¹⁶ However, recent research casts greater light on this period and the control of the war effort. Marlborough was certainly the larger than life character in England, wielding great power with a “comprehension [that] extended to all theaters,” yet he was by no means all powerful as Churchill suggests or omnipotent like Napoleon.¹⁷

¹⁵ Correlli Barnett, *Marlborough* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1974), 27; John B. Hattendorf, *England in the War of the Spanish Succession* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987), 226-229; Simms, *Three Victories and a Defeat*, 49. The reasons for obtaining authorization are shown by Marlborough stating that, if the King should enter into war on his own authority, “we shall never see a quiet day more in England.”

¹⁶ John B Hattendorf, “English Governmental Machinery and the Conduct of War, 1702 – 1713” in *War and Society* 3, no. 2 (September 1985), 1. His power and great statecraft were evident in the alliance; he was undoubtedly the linchpin.

¹⁷ Major General Rokeby, “The Military Character of the Great Duke of Marlborough”, *The Journal of the United Service Institution* 3, no. 11, (1859) pp. 257-270, 266.

Although Queen Anne's succession secured Marlborough and his ascendancy, he was reliant upon her favor; as borne out by his downfall. Queen Anne was a staunch Protestant, and "held it her first duty, in the circumstances of her accession in March 1702, to defeat France in war." She deserves considerable credit for standing fast under great pressures. David Chandler describes her as a "woman of limited intellect and conversation" but also, more importantly, that "her commitment to her demanding task was total and unswerving." Although she sided with the high-church Tories, more extremely as time progressed, she had "qualities of true statesmanship" and recognized the importance of consensus and the support of Parliament.¹⁸ This bipartisanship allowed moderate Tories and the Whigs to share key positions in Parliament before 1710, and no politician was more of a moderate Tory ready to work with the Whigs than Sidney Godolphin, who:

for all his brilliance as Lord Treasurer, was basically a man of very simple and unassuming character. He was more of a public servant than a politician...As Lord Treasurer from May 1702 until August 1710, he was virtual chief minister of England...He proved the steadiest and most trustworthy of Marlborough's associates, and did much to prepare the way for his great campaigns by using his influence and the public purse to good effect.¹⁹

Marlborough recognized the political support and economic underpinnings of war, and was constantly aware of their importance in all he endeavored. However, his successes are attributable in no small measure to Godolphin. Godolphin had to conduct the arduous process of political agreement and funding every year to raise the troops and pay for the Allies. It was Godolphin who dealt with the Tory-Whig differences, Queen Anne, other British interests worldwide and state and financial complexities while Marlborough fought. The Duke of

¹⁸ Trevelyan, *England Under Queen Anne: Blenheim*, 177; David Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 59, 60.

¹⁹ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, 58.

Marlborough also presided over one theater, although his influence was felt elsewhere. The successful conduct of the war was due to Godolphin's acumen and interchange with other figures of power. The formulation of policy and strategy in England therefore, was not the "creation of a single genius," but rather "formulated through a complex interchange of ideas and perceptions." Their partnership was a great example of military and political integration, bound by true friendship, continually acting out of the interests of state. This working relationship as political leader and military commander spanned eight years before Godolphin's dismissal in 1710.²⁰

The Policy of England

The roots of England's war aims were in its overall ideology. Protestantism, the beginnings of a liberal, parliamentary monarchy, the alignment of commercial interests with colonial considerations, and mercantilism underpinned the politics. Furthermore, there was the fear of universal monarchy that drove politics. The politics in England were largely united against France, despite increasingly significant differences between Whigs, more continental in outlook, and Tories, who favored a maritime strategy with a colonial focus as the war progressed. The policy was, therefore: to form an alliance which would endorse the favored contender for the Spanish throne, thereby preserving the Protestant succession through maintaining the balance of power in Europe and setting the conditions for greater trade and wealth accumulation.²¹

This policy manifested itself in four key aims: limit and contain the power of France;

²⁰ "England beat France with the purse as much as the sword, and great credit is due to Godolphin's finance." Trevelyan, *England Under Queen Anne: Blenheim*, 187; Hattendorf, *England in the War of the Spanish Succession*, 53.

²¹ Simms, *Three Victories and a Defeat*, 62-65. On the assumption of power in 1710, the Tories pursued "salvation by...overseas expansion and naval activism" which was to remain the case for the rest of the century; Hattendorf, *England in the War of the Spanish Succession*, 58-59; Burton, *The Captain General*, 18-20.

defend the homeland against potential French attack; safeguard and increase trade; and commit as few troops as possible to the continent. The aims were not necessarily territorial or dynastic in nature, rather any territorial gains fell under these four categories. There is no single, written, collection of documents akin to modern practices, which detail these aims. However, the process of turning policy into national strategy was certainly occurring and was “clearly formulated within the executive sphere of government,” which had worldwide concerns.²²

An alliance to counter French aggression was necessary, as England at the outbreak of the War of the Spanish Succession was no great, military land-power. The army was small, as per British tradition. At the outset, England’s contribution was only 40,000 soldiers, the majority gleaned from German provinces. In contrast, the Dutch provided 100,000 and Austria 82,000. A corollary of the war was a far better army, both reputational and in skill at arms. As Richard Holmes states: “When he [Marlborough] was born a red coat did not mean much on a European battlefield: by the time he died it meant a great deal.” Nevertheless, England’s economic might, large navy, and the leading role of William against the French meant the kingdom was the pivotal member in the reinvigorated Grand Alliance. However, each member had contrasting aims. As General Rupert Smith stated, three hundred years later, “the glue that holds a coalition together is a common enemy, not a common desired political outcome.” This was especially true for the Grand Alliance, which united against Louis XIV.²³

The Duke of Marlborough was at the forefront of coalition negotiations. He had to take English strategy and blend it with coalition partners’ aims. His political and courtier skills were in

²² Hattendorf, *England in the War of the Spanish Succession*, 53-55.

²³ Holmes, *Marlborough: Britain’s Greatest General*, xxvii. A result of better training and organization, which Marlborough excelled at; Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground Up: Twenty-first-century Combat as Politics*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 34.

evidence as he sought to find consensus. To accomplish this, Marlborough was “proclaimed Ambassador-Extra-ordinary and Plenipotentiary, with the right to ‘conceive treaties without reference, if need be, to King or Parliament.’” This gave him tremendous power and demonstrated how he was very much the key figure for England in, not only fighting, but forming and, crucially, constantly maintaining the alliance. He did so, however, empowered greatly although always within the parameters allowed by the Queen and Parliament. The maintenance of the alliance and allied concerns weighed heavily on Marlborough throughout the war.²⁴

The insightful words of Rupert Smith were very much in evidence during the negotiations for the Grand Alliance. Each signatory ultimately had its own national interest to consider, and as much as there were war aims, it was primarily to reduce the power of France and “partition the Spanish inheritance to that end.” This allowed great nuance, and suspicion was in evidence from the outset, and for the duration of the war, that one signatory would seek unilateral terms with France. Nevertheless, flashpoints remained despite broad agreement: control of the Spanish Netherlands; overseas territories compensation, and most conspicuously, the throne of Spain.²⁵

No Peace Without Spain

The unifying aims of the Grand Alliance changed two years later. In negotiating Portugal’s inclusion into the Grand Alliance in 1703, allowing a friendly staging port for allied operations in the Mediterranean and opening up of a second front, the Allies became committed to “no peace without Spain.” The “moderate” aims and strategy established at war’s outbreak

²⁴ J.R. Jones, *Marlborough* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 60; Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, 54.

²⁵ Burton, *The Captain General*, 92; Trevelyan, *England Under Queen Anne: Blenheim*, 146.

significantly expanded. This committed the Allies to winning Spain and placing their favored Austrian candidate upon its throne; viewed by some as a “folly” due to its unachievable nature and the recalcitrant character of the Spanish people to having a ruler thrust upon them. However, on King William’s death, his life work of containing the power of Louis XIV seemed assured. The man he chose to continue his work and, consequently, accepted as military commander in the Grand Alliance by the Dutch, was, surprisingly, John Churchill.²⁶

The Man

The reasons this was surprising stem from the complexities of Marlborough as a man. Marlborough remains very much an enigmatic figure. His letters survive as do the opinions of him by others; however, it is a shame is that he never wrote his memoirs. Although contrastingly, the absence of memoirs may indeed strengthen the myth surrounding him. As Richard Holmes suggests, this was the mark of the man, conscious of his period; never publically liberal in his opinions, and guarded. This is attributable to the age and his formative experiences.²⁷

Early in life, John Churchill was disenfranchised, poor, and owed his initial progress to the favor of the Royal Court, Catholic in nature. Marlborough never forgot his relatively humble beginnings. His sister was the mistress of James, the Duke of York, King Charles’ brother and heir to the throne. John Churchill, as a result, became a page to James and owed much of his early ascent to this relationship. At court he honed his charm and diplomacy; J.R Jones argues that

²⁶ Trevelyan, *England Under Queen Anne: Blenheim*, 299; Taylor, *Marlborough’s Wars*, 58: William described Marlborough to his sister-in-law Anne: “ ‘as the fittest person in all her dominions to conduct her armies and to preside in her councils...proper to encounter the genius of France, suppressing her designs of swallowing all Europe.’ ” From Lediard, *Life of Duke of Marlborough* (1736) vol. 1, 136.

²⁷ Holmes, *Marlborough: Britain’s Greatest General*, 40.

Marlborough “owed his rise to prominence and great influence to his skills as a courtier.” It is in these formative experiences that the complexity of his character emerges. Churchill’s charm is not in doubt, nor are his diplomatic skills and courting of foreign rulers for the cause. However, as Trevelyan discusses, the contradictions are inherent as he was certainly, “uxorious, ambitious and avaricious” but likewise, “charming, patient, courteous.”²⁸

Then came the Glorious Revolution (1688-1689). John Churchill deserted the side of his royal benefactor from infancy, James II, and allied himself with William. This betrayal on grounds of religious conscience, or self-serving promotion, effectively ended James II’s attempts to prevent William from seizing power. It is in this duplicitous action, those of a turncoat, where many of the arguments for, and against, the Duke of Marlborough rest. This act of treason led William to never fully trust him during his reign, even landing Marlborough in the Tower of London for a spell, until William later put aside his misgivings and entrusted Marlborough with continuing the campaign against the French.²⁹

The balancing, or playing of both sides, depicts how precarious, cut-throat and transient the domestic political atmosphere was throughout the period, and how shrewd, perhaps underhanded, the Duke of Marlborough was. It certainly gave his detractors plenty of ammunition, exemplified in late 1711. The notable pamphleteer Jonathan Swift assisted his Tory friends in publishing *The Conduct of the Allies and of the Late Ministry in Beginning and Carrying on the Present War*, which alluded to improper payments and allegations of prolonging

²⁸ Jones, *Marlborough*, 8; Trevelyan, *England Under Queen Anne: Blenheim*, 182-183.

²⁹ Lord Macauley, *The History of England from the Accession of James the Second*, vol. 4. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1856), 575. Macauley was one of his largest detractors, shaming him for greed, his communications with Jacobites and in essence endorsing all the allegations the pamphleteers promulgated towards the end of the war.

the war for Marlborough's own ends. This effectively led to Marlborough's exile, although no charges were ultimately brought. These contradictions, or survival skills, of Marlborough contribute to his fame not being commensurate with his accomplishments in many regards. The besmirching of his character left significant damage. However, what is not in doubt are his military actions during the war, a product of his previous experiences.³⁰

John Churchill's first experiences were fighting with the French, under their great captain Henri de la Tour d'Auvergne, Vicomte de Turenne, something which undoubtedly helped when he ended up fighting them, and winning. His formative tuition under Turenne taught him skills such as audacity and offensive spirit, which were in evidence throughout the war, especially in the march to the Danube in 1704. Furthermore, John Churchill experienced war at sea and knew of its value and difficulties.³¹ For example, after the revolution in Ireland, Churchill successfully orchestrated an amphibious operation against Cork. Churchill also had experience in Flanders prior to the War of the Spanish Succession. In what has been described as "Marlborough in miniature," the campaign of 1689 showed the attributes he was to bring to the fore a decade later. The English army was disorganized and humiliated after the revolution in 1688. Forming part of

³⁰ Henry L. Snyder, ed. *The Marlborough – Godolphin Correspondence*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 1682. There was a great quantity of literature which doubted his accomplishments in 1711. Louise Hume Creighton, *Life of John Churchill: Duke of Marlborough*. (London: Longmans, Green, 1892), 270, 271. Creighton highlights the role of the periodical: *The Examiner* set up to attack the Whig Government and by extension Marlborough. The attacks were very personal, although, there were some rebuttals.

³¹ "Marlborough learnt from a French general how to destroy French armies." Viscount G.J. Wolseley, *Life of Marlborough to the Accession of Queen Anne*, vol. 1, (London: R Bentley and Sons, 1894), 146; Creighton, *Life of John Churchill*, 6-7; C.T. Atkinson, *Marlborough and the Rise of the British Army* (London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1921), 15-17. Atkinson highlights how Turenne taught how to insert art into marches, framing the campaign and also from Conde, another great French commander, those skills of "inspiration, dash, audacity" which were to so shape his campaigns; Correlli Barnett, *Marlborough* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1974), 41.

a force to contain French expansion in the Spanish Netherlands, Marlborough trained, drilled, and equipped his force, and then led it into battle, famously at Walcourt. Marlborough was fifty when he took over the allied forces in 1702. He was experienced and learned much about “feeling the balance of battle,” as well as the importance of training and logistics.³²

The most important person in Marlborough’s life was Sarah Churchill. A complex and compelling character, their marriage, partnership, and love are without parallel in British history. Sarah Churchill’s confidante relationship with Queen Anne greatly aided the Duke of Marlborough’s position and power. She was combustible, passionate, and was often as much a hindrance as help. Her strong political opinions increasingly clouded her judgment and eventually led to a complete breakdown in her relationship with the Queen. Sarah Churchill also placed great strain on the Duke of Marlborough. However, their love and partnership is irrefutable.

The Duke of Marlborough was, subsequently, at the outbreak of war a relatively experienced military man, albeit the war was to be his first true command. He knew the political realities, a result of growing up in court, and had married for love. This too brought advancement and power, as both Sarah and he were extremely close to the Queen. Marlborough had formed a coalition using all his skill, acumen and charm, a product of both his personality and experiences. However, he was also known for his treachery in 1688 and reputation for seeking promotion, position, and profit. This complex figure was to lead the allied war effort for ten years.

The Progression of the War

The War of the Spanish Succession’s annual campaigns although interlinked, were also separate entities. Certain themes, however, were consistent throughout, such as: the struggles of coalition warfare; the illusion of decisiveness; the character of warfare; multiple dilemmas and

³² Holmes, *Marlborough: Britain’s Greatest General*, 160-162, 458; Jones, *Marlborough*, 220-222, 234.

the primacy of the political.

Marlborough's campaigns of 1702 and 1703 showed his skill at maneuver but also the struggles he endured fighting in a coalition. The coalition was a necessity for England, yet the understandable, although inherently, contrasting views and acceptance of risk led to missed opportunities. Trevelyan, among others, argues that if Marlborough had a free reign and full command, the Spanish Netherlands would have been freed as early as 1702. Frank Taylor concurs and describes the years of 1702 and 1703 as the most divisive of the war. However, Dutch concerns cannot be idly dismissed, they too had pertinent strategic considerations and Marlborough, it must be remembered, was on his first independent command. As David Chandler states of missed opportunities and the valid obstinacy of the Dutch: "Here we see the conflict between military and political priorities; an aspect of these ten campaigns which will all too often recur. As a soldier Marlborough was wrong to throw up the opportunity; as a statesman, he chose the right course."³³

The disagreements stemmed from Marlborough's outlook on warfare and visualization of campaigning; namely seeking battle and a decisive strike. His approach echoes modern fallacies of decisiveness and was firmly at odds with the prevailing consensus of warfare. Warfare was, at the time, attritional, diplomatically focused, with "slow operational tempo" and short campaign seasons. Indeed, Marlborough conducted far more sieges than battles, and although he "displayed its [warfare's] full potential" he also, Lynn argues, represents warfare's "abiding limitations." The character of warfare itself curtailed the military means. However, Lynn discounts the numerous attempts Marlborough made to break the mold: Toulon, and in 1708 post Oudenaarde. Warfare was indeed constrained, limited, and attritional in many regards. Moreover, decisive

³³ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, 101.

strategic victory, as it is today, was an oxymoron, an anomaly incongruent with warfare of his time. However, crucially this was not through preference, through a lack of visualization of a campaign, or seeking to change this paradigm by Marlborough.³⁴

Blenheim represented this illusion of decisiveness. In one of the greatest campaigns in the history of war; Marlborough achieved a decisive tactical victory, a result of detailed operational art, with the clear strategic effect of keeping Austria in the Grand Alliance. Furthermore, in defeating the perceived invincible French, he heralded a new era in European history. However, it was not enough and the war continued. He followed Blenheim with several other great tactical victories: Ramillies (1706), Oudenaarde (1708), and the Pyrrhic victory at Malplaquet (1709). Malplaquet was a bloodbath and although the Allies carried the field, the success was not as defined as in his previous battles. Ultimately, although each battle gave strategic advantage to the Allies, none proved decisive in ending the war. This can be explained in part by Marlborough's exploits occurring in only one theater, the relative qualitative and quantitative parity of forces, the supremacy of political over military outcomes, and what Lynn terms "war as a process," as shown by the peace overtures during the war.³⁵

France offered peace in late 1708, early 1709 in the months prior to Malplaquet. The French were teetering on the brink of collapse; a poor harvest and a bitter winter had left even Louis XIV seeking peace, and on very beneficial terms for the Allies. The Grand Alliance; however, made a serious misjudgment. The terms were simply too harsh: all of Spain, important cities handed over to the Allies as guarantees, as well as accepting the Protestant succession.

³⁴ Lynn, *The Wars of Louis XIV*, 286, 370-375. Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, 62-64.

³⁵ Lynn, *The Wars of Louis XIV*, 367-368.

Louis XIV could not make a dishonorable peace. It is likely Marlborough knew this was harsh, yet the political side of the coalition rejected the agreement.³⁶ The demand for all of Spain by the allies, robbing Louis XIV's grandson of an inheritance was chiefly the cause. It also had the secondary effect of a rallying call to arms for the French. Once the demands were published, a French army defeated at Oudenaarde, and with the citadel of Lille taken, was still able to raise troops for the following campaigns. The political saw military action as an instrument to achieve policies that simply could not be delivered by military means.

The War of the Spanish Succession was also fought in several theaters and numerous plans were floated and executed to present the French with multiple dilemmas. A good example of this was the Toulon operation in 1707. Marlborough's formative experiences led to his support for a joint, multinational amphibious assault on Toulon. Although the plan failed, the design was evidence of his sound strategic mind. Marlborough recognized the importance of Spain, was attuned to London's policy and worldwide outlook. However, he always firmly believed in the primacy of his fight in Flanders. This showed, as Michael Howard discusses, a firm appreciation of the British way of warfare: economic underpinning and strategic seapower.³⁷

This is the context to the campaign in 1711. England's ideology and political scene led to the unique English prosecution of the war in pursuit of its policy. A policy shaped by balance of power considerations, and the Grand Alliance. The addition of Spain, as a defined war aim, had significant consequences. The representative, parliamentary maturity of England also meant that, although Marlborough was the larger than life character in England, he was subservient to

³⁶ Donald Barr Chidsey, *Marlborough: The Portrait of a Conqueror* (New York: John Day, 1929), 248-250.

³⁷ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, 197-199; Michael Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 49.

political machinations, assisted by his friendship of the Queen and ally and friend Godolphin.

The Campaign of 1711

To deceive the enemy as to the real point of attack – to perplex him by marches and countermarches – to assume and constantly maintain the initiative – to win by skill what could not be achieved by force, was his great delight; and in that, the highest branch of the military art, he was unrivalled in modern times.

- Archibald Alison, *The Life of the Duke of Marlborough Vol. 2*

The Operational Environment

Politically there was a significant shift in England with the removal of Godolphin in August 1710. The Tories now commanded the agenda, and Sarah Churchill's complete estrangement from Queen Anne heightened the ensuing effects. Therefore, two key pillars of Marlborough's position had been eroded. First, his power and hold over the Queen, in no small part due to Sarah previously, had irreversibly weakened to the point of fracture. Second, that great partnership with his friend Godolphin, so adept at managing political machinations and purse strings, had been disbanded and the Tories were now in power. These Tories, Robert Harley and Henry St. John, had in turns been in support of Marlborough previously. However, this support soured as they denigrated his character for political purposes and sought a secretive, unilateral peace with France. It is important to note, however, that the Tory position was understandable and not without popular support.

The Tories viewed the war and British national strategy in different terms to the Whigs; more maritime and colonial in outlook rather than a preoccupation with European affairs. The Tories came to power based on a general election. Furthermore, the unique free press, a wide-circulation, evident public interest, even "natural obsession," with containing Louis in England, as well as political propaganda, resulted in an informed audience. This, coupled with economic pressures such as increased debt on account of war costs, heavier taxation to pay for the war, and rising costs of food meant there was discontent amongst the British populace. However, Marlborough remained popular and the Tories needed him to hold the Alliance together, put

pressure on France to allow for negotiations, and for the peace plan to succeed. Importantly, England's allies must not suspect any foul play, or they might have been tempted to seek their own peace.³⁸

Marlborough, despite the near complete erosion of his political power, returned for the campaign of 1711. He was "indispensable" still and the Queen and Harley knew it. As Trevelyan states: "[The Duke of Marlborough] was no longer the recognized chief of the Alliance, laying its plans of campaign by land and sea all over the world. He was only the commander of the British and Dutch forces in the Netherlands, and that on a most uncertain and humiliating tenure." As 1711 began, he knew the tenuousness of his position. However, he fought on, out of honor and a sense of duty to the Queen, his soldiers, and allied comrades in arms. In addition, this campaign, more than any other during the war, is indicative of the modern-day. Shorn of considerable amounts of political power and influence, although still undoubtedly with gravitas, his constrained room for maneuver, albeit for different reasons, reflects the modern, western civil-military paradigm. This allows certain parallels to be drawn. Marlborough was always subservient, as shown by his fall from grace, yet he had great power, unrecognizable to modern commanders. In 1711, however, he came as close to contemporary practice than in any other year.³⁹

England continued to have worldwide concerns. For example, vested interests in England had resulted in a force being sent to Quebec, diminishing the amount of troops available for

³⁸ Simms, *Three Victories and a Defeat*, 53,54; Burton, *The Captain General*, 177; Hattendorf, *England in the War of the Spanish Succession*, 219: Public opinion did not amount to "serious consideration" of "war strategy" rather concerns rooted in simultaneously pursuing a "policy of defence of the nation, trade and offensive with France."; Barnett, *Marlborough*, 252.

³⁹ Barnett, *Marlborough*, 251; Trevelyan, *England Under Queen Anne: The Peace and the Protestant Succession*, 129.

Marlborough in 1711. It was emblematic of Marlborough's declining political power. Abigail Hill, who had supplanted Sarah Churchill in Queen Anne's affections, enabled her brother, Brig. Gen. John Hill, to command the disastrous mission. In addition, as the year progressed the situation in the Spanish theater deteriorated drastically. Allied forces held only Barcelona, having lost control in Madrid and other areas. So, not only were other operations in distant theaters distracting from Flanders, but the war situation in Spain required national strategic readjustment.⁴⁰

For the Grand Alliance, the most important event was in April 1711. The Habsburg Emperor, Joseph, died, which was crucial for two reasons. In terms of policy, it ironically gave the Allies' claimant for the Spanish throne, Charles, his own throne in Austria. The aims that the Allies had been fighting for, to prevent hegemonic rule over Spain and Europe, a universal monarchy, would occur if Charles was to stay the preferred allied candidate; merely trading Bourbon for Habsburg dynasties. Indeed, Burton describes war aims at this point as being "absurd." The second key factor was that Marlborough's great military partner, Prince Eugene of Savoy, was called back to defend the Habsburg state after Joseph's death. The Dutch meanwhile, became increasingly wary of England's intents for peace, and the price of the war.⁴¹

As for the enemy, France was suffering greatly. The army endured poor supplies of basic foodstuffs, and constraints placed on their commander Claude Louis Hector de Villars; Marshal Villars. Louis XIV told him, in late 1710, to "Risk nothing. Stall, delay – while I negotiate." Marshal Villars, however, was by nature more aggressive, and Sturgill explains that although in his letters he asked repeatedly for permission to do more, he was resolutely told to remain on the

⁴⁰ Chidsey, *Marlborough*, 267.

⁴¹ Ivor F. Burton, *The Captain General* (London: Constable, 1968), 180; Snyder, *The Marlborough – Godolphin Correspondence*, vol. 3, 1665; Chidsey, *Marlborough*, 267.

defensive. Louis XIV wanted to wear the Allies down, break the alliance by diplomacy, and sicken them through inflicting huge casualties, as at Malplaquet. Furthermore, Sturgill also argues that Villars knew of the situation in London and the impact he predicted this would have on Marlborough. This shaped Villars' view considerably during the campaign of 1711. As he observed Marlborough's actions in 1711, he was to reflect: "how politics could rob a soldier of all his senses." Villars also knew Marlborough of old, his offensive and audacious spirit and, consequently, wisely remained behind the lines. His strategic objective was to block Marlborough and allow time for peace talks to develop.⁴²

Marlborough faced an extremely difficult situation. The French constructed, with remarkable Maginot Line comparisons, a series of defensive fortifications to protect France. It was the last line before Paris, and the French commander, Villars, described them as perfect.⁴³ They gave this line the name; *Ne Plus Ultra*. The defenses were extensive, consisting of earthworks, strongpoints, fortresses, control of waterways as well as a sizeable French force positioned opposite, capable of blocking any allied advance. They covered some two-hundred miles, with only a few stretches, around fifteen miles, not "sufficiently covered by water or marsh." The French, with the benefit of interior lines, could move at ease to face Marlborough at any point, with fortifications and natural obstacles in support. This was the operational environment in 1711. Marlborough now had to take English policy and craft a strategy.⁴⁴

⁴² Claude C. Sturgill, *Marshal Villars and the War of the Spanish Succession*, (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), 103, 104-107; Chidsey, *Marlborough*, 271.

⁴³ Chidsey, *Marlborough*, 266.

⁴⁴ *Ne Plus Ultra*, figuratively; thou shalt not pass. Some sources also use *non plus ultra*. Term originates from a boastful letter from Villars to Louis XIV. Alison, *The military life of John, 1st Duke of Marlborough*, 280; John Hussey, "Marlborough and the Loss of Arleux, 1711, Accident or Design?" in *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 70, Issue 281 (Spring 1992), 7; Belloc, *The Tactics & Strategy of the Great Duke of Marlborough*, 214-216.

Strategy

The most important element to strategy formulation is that it is a human endeavor. Therefore, it is necessary first to examine Marlborough's mindset in 1711. Marlborough's strategic outlook in 1711, however, is hard to discern. He was, as always, set on battle with the French and to compel them to peace terms. In addition, as a result of the political propaganda, in 1711 he had his own reputation to protect. However, although the few previous battles resulted in great tactical success, and strategic exploitation, they did not manufacture a peace. The war, typified more by siege than battle, raged on. Nevertheless, neither his frame nor outlook truly changed.⁴⁵

Marlborough certainly appeared more methodical by 1710; limited by politics, French unwillingness to fight, and perhaps the effects of nine years of campaigning on Marlborough himself. The Pyrrhic victory at Malplaquet undoubtedly weighed heavily upon a commander renowned for his concern for his soldiers' welfare. Furthermore, he continually stated his wish for peace, as he wrote to Sarah in the winter of 1710. He was also an old man by the standards of his time, entering his sixty-first year in 1711. Marlborough was human and all these factors had to affect his ability to formulate a strategy.⁴⁶

Strategy formulation is a process that, Lawrence Freedman argues, "is the art of creating power." The creation of this power, Clausewitz states, is through the use of tactical military force, or "engagement," "for the object of war." An "object" that must come from politics which in turn

Another very good description of the great difficulty of the lines.

⁴⁵ Key aspects to the formulation, character and execution of strategy, among others, that it is human, temporal and dependent on dialogue and individual skill respectively is highlighted in Colin Gray, *The Future of Strategy* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015), 47-48.

⁴⁶ "I do assure you upon my word and honour that I do with all my heart wish we may have peace this winter." Snyder, *The Marlborough – Godolphin Correspondence*, vol. 3., 1639.

drives the policy, a point made clear by Alexander Svechin: “policy provides the general direction and means of travel.” Military strategy, he continues, “determines the appropriate route and timing, and confirms that sufficient resources are available for the journey to be taken.” A point echoed by Colin Gray, who argues: “Strategy can be about many things, but primarily it must always be about politics,” as it is the “enabling mechanism.” He contends that Freedman’s definition is inappropriate and he defines military strategy as “the direction and use made of force and the threat of force for the purposes of policy as decided by politics.”⁴⁷

Marlborough’s direction and use of force in accordance with the known policy was to seek to defeat the French through offensive action, thereby compelling France to accept terms, namely the complete surrender of the Spanish throne. He was also to maintain the support of the coalition. The object of the campaign was the fortress of Bouchain which required passing the lines of *Ne Plus Ultra*; a clear strategy with a defined objective. However, evolving political aims overtook the strategy. Military strategy’s object or objects, are not the same as the overriding political goals they seek to accomplish.

Superficially, there was no change to English war aims. However, a key transition occurred in 1707 and with the failure of the Toulon expedition. The chances of success in Spain began to unravel and, after this point, Marlborough became wedded to achieving an attritional victory in Flanders. Marlborough knew the policy. Indeed, many of the political objectives had been achieved: the threat to the homeland had been virtually eliminated, the Allies were in a more advantageous position and English trade was still secure. However, in 1711 the situation in Spain

⁴⁷ Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), xii; Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 177; Gray, *The Future of Strategy*, 7, 21; Alexander Svechin, *Strategy*, translated by Kent D. Lee (Minneapolis, MN: East View Publications, 1992), 70.

deteriorated towards failure and, with a new government in charge in London, these war aims became an albatross around Marlborough's neck. This is because of both the temporal character of strategy formulation, and that strategy is not just a process, but also a level.⁴⁸

The military strategic level is "the place where operational art and policy meet." This idea is crucial as, for the meeting to occur, the strategic process "does not merely need to orchestrate tactical actions (the use of force) but also construct the interpretive structure which gives them meaning and links them to the end of policy." It must understand the character of warfare and define the object, which was Marlborough's responsibility. He had to transfer political aims into a military strategy that was palatable to a domestic audience on one level, and, additionally, the wider coalition.⁴⁹

The temporal character of strategy manifested itself in a considerably changed context by 1711. This should be reflected in, foremost, the policy from which a purposeful military strategy is developed to direct the use of force. Strategy does not sit in isolation as either a process or level. It must be dynamic, attuned to policy, and the military situation.

Unfortunately for Marlborough, he did not know the policy had changed. The military situation was firmly in Marlborough's hands, although resource constrained, and with the great challenge of the lines of *Ne Plus Ultra*. Nevertheless, he had to accept these constraints as a military commander and shape a strategy to accomplish the policy as he knew it. To meet this evolving context and political aims, dialogue was required.

⁴⁸ "1707 had proved entirely barren of strategic gain for the Allies and it was inevitable that the entire basis of their strategy should have to be re-examined." Burton, *The Captain General*, 115, 192-194.

⁴⁹ Hew Strachan, "Strategy or Alibi? Obama, McChrystal and the Operational Level of War" in *Survival* 52, no. 5 (Oct-Nov 2010): 157-182, 158; Simpson, *War from the Ground Up*, 28; Robert D. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," in *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (1988): 427-460, 433.

Political masters masked their true intentions in 1711. The policy evolved, the strategy remained static: certainly, the strategic objectives, by virtue of it being a new campaign, had changed, the intent had not. Therefore, despite great individual skill in framing and execution, Marlborough formulated a strategy based on an extinct policy. No peace without Spain by 1711 was unachievable. Therein lies the fundamental flaw in Marlborough's final campaign. Politicians had ceased to have open and transparent dialogue with Marlborough, a fact furthered by him being wedded to the unaccomplishable. If he had known of the peace overtures, then his military strategy could have been to attain a better negotiating position. In this regard, he would have been vastly successful. However, this was not the policy he strategized. He may have wished for peace, yet he fought for a peace secured by decisive French defeat. Continually, since 1704, policymakers asked for more than military strategy could deliver. As a result, France survived and, subsequently, by 1711 the situation improved for France geopolitically.

The allied campaign in Spain was stumbling to failure, and the vagaries caused by the death of Emperor Joseph muddied the waters further. The chances of success, the final defeat of France, were very slim. Marlborough had been let down by political demands and his own failures to endorse a peace in the years prior. The "direction" and use of military force was misapplied in 1711 for the purpose of the policy Marlborough envisaged. He was certainly bereft of influence, yet he must shoulder some of the responsibility for the strategic failure of the allied war effort.⁵⁰ The means, sieges and attrition, were unlikely to win the war. Yet with a battle averse French and warfare constraints, Marlborough's hands were to an extent tied. Nevertheless, irrespective of the flaws in strategy as a process and level, there is a great paradox to 1711. The 1711 campaign strategy worked brilliantly for the politicians. It was not decisive victory, rather a

⁵⁰ Jones, *Marlborough*, 194-196.

“pure” example of Dolmanian strategy.⁵¹ The politicians achieved great concessions from the French thanks to Marlborough’s efforts. 1711 represented political advantage, achieved by military brilliance seeking an unaccomplishable purpose.

Operational Art

The pure military artistry with which he repeatedly deceived Villars during the first part of the campaign has few equals in the annals of military history, rarely before had an enemy commander been so fooled and induced to make the very moves his opponent desired.

- David Chandler, *Marlborough as a Military Commander*

Marshall Villars was fatally wrong in 1711; Marlborough had not lost his senses at all. His operational artistry was still peerless. Operational art is centuries old yet a relatively recent inclusion into modern doctrine. In British doctrine, “Operational Art translates strategic direction into tactical execution. It is the orchestration of a campaign, in concert with other agencies, to convert (at the operational level) strategic objectives into tactical activity and employment of forces, in order to achieve a desired outcome.” However, an operational level is contentious, and Marlborough conducted this translation firmly at the military strategic level. The translation is a result of “a combination of judgement and labour, art and science, analysis and intuition. The term operational art emphasizes the importance of a more intuitive alignment of ends, ways and means, than that provided by science alone.” The tenets of operational art are: commander’s skill, in essence the ability of the commander, their experience and qualities such as imagination, intellect, fostering of command climate and pragmatism; campaign design, the planning and

⁵¹ The formation of strategy is, according to Dolman, “unending” and “a plan for attaining continuing advantage.” It is, furthermore, fluid and flexible. Everett Carl Dolman, *Pure Strategy: Power and Principles in the Space and Information Age* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1-10.

framing of a campaign, and finally, campaign management, which is the execution of a campaign. This corresponds with the crafting of an *Operational Approach* in United States Army Doctrine.⁵²

Marlborough understood the military situation, and now sought to visualize and orchestrate what was to follow. The map below depicts the campaign of 1711 and passage of the lines of *Ne Plus Ultra*.

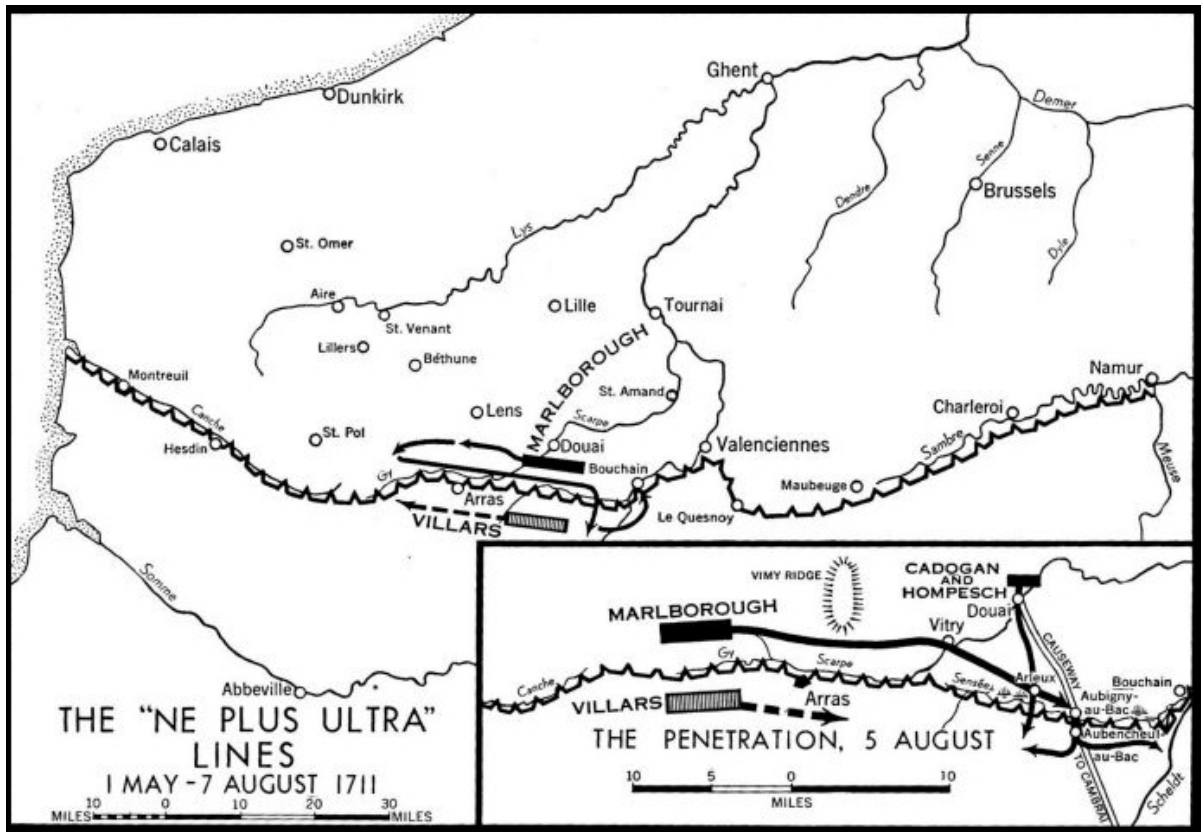


Figure 2. The *Ne Plus Ultra* Lines.

Map by Gerald William Lingen Nicholson in *Marlborough and The War of the Spanish Succession* Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1955.

⁵² Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) *Operations* (Shrivenham, Ministry of Defence, United Kingdom: DCDC Publications, 2010), 7-2. British doctrinal references will be used throughout; however, the United States Army's Operational Approach taxonomy will be used during discussion as the process of understand, visualize, describe and direct with ongoing assessment is a useful, cyclical framework to highlight the actions a commander should undertake.

The campaign started off slowly. Marlborough, unsurprisingly considering the situation in England, returned to the continent very early in February. It was not until July, however, that the campaign came alive. In line with his offensive nature, he moved towards the French lines. Villars, thinking he knew his opponent, brought in additional forces from garrisons to face the perceived imminent attack. Force management by the French was to have serious consequences later on in the campaign; depleting the garrison at Bouchain. Marlborough knew his enemy and that they would not attack.⁵³ Subsequently, a potential stalemate ensued. Two large forces positioned opposite each-other, the French protected by their lines, and natural barriers. Marlborough now had to use his imagination, backed by substantial intellect, to facilitate the flow from strategy and his desired outcome, to tactical action. The difficulty lay in working out where to attack.

There were two principal roads, both protected by fortifications, which led to Paris in the near area. The raised causeway, at Arleux, some thirty miles from Marlborough's camp, however, offered opportunity. The fort, which was held by the French, protected the road and could be easily taken as it lay on the North side of the Scheldt River, Marlborough's side. In addition, the area had to be secured if Marlborough was to take the fortress city of Bouchain. However, if he took Arleux, the game would be up and the French would move in force, quickly, using interior lines, to prevent Marlborough's crossing. The plan was set in motion. Arleux, the strongpoint, was attacked and taken on 6 July by a subordinate force under the command of the Prussian General Reinhard Vincent Graf von Hompesch. At this juncture, the most interesting point of this campaign arose: "Was the whole thing deliberately planned from beginning to end by

⁵³ Snyder, *The Marlborough – Godolphin Correspondence*, vol. 3., 1673. In a letter to Godolphin, Marlborough discusses the French unwillingness to do battle. Showing how he shaped his approach to the campaign of 1711: adapting and reading the enemy's intentions.

Marlborough as a ruse, or was it an unfortunate accident of which he had the genius to take advantage?”⁵⁴

The majority of the commentators suggest it was a concocted, imaginative act of great deception born of operational art. Winston Churchill was convinced, and calls the passing of the lines of *Ne Plus Ultra*; “Marlborough’s finest stratagem and manoeuvre.” Even if what followed was accidental, Marlborough was pragmatic enough, another of the key attributes of operational art, to recognize opportunity and exploit it masterfully. Furthermore, his actions demonstrated that he constantly reassessed during a campaign. He could adapt his plans to meet his overarching intent. This reassessment occurred irrespective of whether it was an inspired deception plan. Marlborough never rested on his laurels and assessed events constantly to help him both understand, and visualize, the next tactical action.⁵⁵

Marlborough ordered the fort at Arleux to be defended and improved, however, he did not leave a strong force in place. Instead, he marched to the west with the majority of his army and began a “complex series of moves designed to fool the vainglorious but able Villars.” The capture of Arleux sought to lure Villars into an attack, which he promptly did on 11 July. Arleux soon fell and Marlborough’s response was to “feign” grave annoyance at General Hompesch for losing Arleux. This aimed to misinform spies and create the impression his plans had been foiled. Villars, enjoying the victory, ordered the fortifications at Arleux destroyed. In so doing, Villars assumed he had thwarted Marlborough’s plans. In reality, he had actually cleared a path ready for exploitation. Villars then followed Marlborough’s army west. Once again, two armies faced each other. However, crucially this time, both armies were now positioned thirty miles west of the

⁵⁴ Chidsey, *Marlborough*, 269; Belloc, *The Tactics & Strategy of the Great Duke of Marlborough*, 219.

⁵⁵ Churchill, *Marlborough: His Life and Times*, 439.

causeway at Arleux. Marlborough had put distance between his intended objective and the French. He brought time. Villars now sat back, faced the allied army, and awaited Marlborough's response. Marlborough commenced the third act of deception. He behaved exactly as Villars expected, forming his army up to attack, and, on 4 August, reconnoitered in person the French lines. Villars stood ready to meet another Marlborough assault.⁵⁶

Marlborough did not attack. His skill and campaign design had put him in an advantageous position, and had deceived the French. Now, he had to manage the campaign. Marlborough and his army, enabled by Earl Cadogan, now executed his plan. On the evening of 4 August, the army struck camp and, in the darkness, rapidly counter-marched east; over nineteen miles, in under eight hours. Hompesch and Cadogan, who had furtively slipped away from camp earlier that day on Marlborough's orders, had already seized the causeway at Arleux. A further ten miles was still expected of the force. In total, some British regiments covered thirty-nine miles in eighteen hours that evening. Robert Parker, who chronicled his time fighting under Marlborough, describes the despondency felt in camp at the loss of Arleux, the expectation that they were to fight, and then the joy as they struck camp, their faith in Marlborough reinvigorated to such an extent that the march was completed: "with all the cheerfulness imaginable," carrying packs weighing some fifty pounds. Villars found out five hours late that Marlborough had struck camp. A race to Arleux ensued, and the prize of Bouchain. One that Villars was doomed to lose: "The forcing of the lines of 1711 was that kind of strategic surprise in which the thing was obvious *if possible*, but was not thought possible by the enemy."⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, 287 and 286-290; Churchill, *Marlborough: His Life and Times*, 426-429; Belloc, *The Tactics & Strategy of the Great Duke of Marlborough*, 218-222.

⁵⁷ David Chandler ed. *Robert Parker and Comte de Merode Westerloo*. (Connecticut:

This maneuver had it all. Marlborough had pierced the seemingly impenetrable without a single loss of life. He had achieved, subjugating the French's army without fighting, what Sun Tzu refers to as the pinnacle of success. It was risk-taking at its boldest, supported by grand deception, and a remarkable feat of arms by his men, all crafted by operational art.

Marlborough next recognized another key piece of operational art, namely its placement and balance. This was conveyed two centuries later by Svechin when he stated: "just as tactics is an extension of operational art and operational art is an extension of strategy, strategy is an extension of politics."⁵⁸ Operational art facilitates the flow from strategy through to tactics, an irrevocable connection. Operational art therefore, is the fulcrum between strategy and tactics. It is a process, acting as the pivot between the two, ensuring they are synchronous, the lever in harmony above the fulcrum. Dependent on the type of operation, and temporal considerations, strategic or tactical concerns may be weighted more heavily. However, thanks to operational art acting as the fulcrum, the link is not severed and both are counterbalanced.

The tactical action had been overwhelmingly successful. Marlborough now had to rebalance, remember his strategy and the importance of the fortress of Bouchain which would, in effect, open the gates to Paris. Marlborough's judgment was crucial here. There was an opportunity to seek battle with the now caught up French. Burton questions why he chose another siege when he could take battle, and that "there was no logical end to a policy of capturing towns." The only plausible logic in fact, was that he was thinking of a further campaign

Archon Books, 1968), 103. There is variance as to the exact distance; Parker puts the march at thirty-nine miles. Regardless, it was an impressive feat of arms. Parker also states his belief that the whole thing was a masterly crafted ruse by Marlborough: ordering the attack the next day, before darkness fell and then ordering the soldiers to break camp; Belloc, *The Tactics & Strategy of the Great Duke of Marlborough*, 17.

⁵⁸ Svechin, *Strategy*, 70.

in 1712. His frame had arguably changed, as discussed due to his age, experiences and also ill health; Marlborough was frequently sick and endured more headaches, a precursor of the stroke that was to kill him.⁵⁹ Burton asserts his action was “so far removed from his earlier policy of accepting the need when challenged to engage in battle as to suggest that Marlborough had lost his taste for major engagements.” From this perspective, Marlborough had lost sense of what he needed to achieve; a decisive defeat compelling France to agree to allied terms. By extension therefore, his operational art was flawed. The decision he took, to turn down battle, would not meet the strategic aim.⁶⁰

However, Winston Churchill and others, while acknowledging the human element and pressures upon Marlborough, which Burton highlights, counter that it was the right decision.⁶¹ One also supported by Earl Cadogan. The French still outnumbered Marlborough, despite their hasty defense. Indeed, Marlborough hoped that Villars would attack, ceding the advantage of his defensive position. The reality was a general in full command, tactically excellent. However, he had become overly focused militarily, which imbalanced his operational artistry, and interrupted its correct flow from policy.

The siege of Bouchain that followed was another masterpiece. Marlborough fended off Villars, protected tenuous resupply routes while investing a critical part of the defense of France

⁵⁹ Burton, *The Captain General*, 182, 180-183; Patricia Dickson. “Passage of the Lines,” in *The Army Quarterly and Defence Journal* 112, no. 2, (April 1982), 199-205. Dickson argues that Marlborough was mentally unstable from the time of Eugene’s departure onwards, and that much of the credit for the passage rests with Earl Cadogan and the Dutch Commander Gosinga.

⁶⁰ Snyder, *The Marlborough – Godolphin Correspondence*, vol. 3., 1673, 1675-76. July 1711 - letter “You may be very well assured that my inclinations are at this time for a battle, believing it to be the intirest of the common cause, as well as my own honour.” This shows he was very wary of the enemy strength and to do battle against the French’s entrenched position.

⁶¹ Churchill, *Marlborough: His Life and Times*, 438.

herself. Bouchain ultimately fell, as every city Marlborough besieged did. Perhaps as some suggest, the capture of Bouchain could have ended the war, such was its significance. The road to Paris lay open, and this fact endorses Marlborough's operational art: achieving a strategic aim through tactical action. However, this necessitated another campaign. Marlborough seemed to believe yet another year would solve the issue, after ten previous campaigns had failed. This is not to suggest that siege was the wrong decision, it almost certainly was not. Merely that another siege would not solve the war's impasse. The seizure of Bouchain was to be Marlborough's last military act, and at its core lay his tactical excellence.⁶²

Tactical Action

A portrait of Marlborough's campaign composed solely of strategy and orchestration through operational art would constitute merely a grand frame and blank canvas without the brushstrokes of tactical execution. They also represent a further distinction between modern generals and those in the early 1700s. Marlborough was often at the forefront and in grave danger, experiences alien to the majority of senior army commanders contemporarily. Nevertheless, his actions and, above all, philosophy of command represent lessons for any commander. There are a multitude of areas tactically, for example expeditionary logistics and fighting a coalition, which could be highlighted by Marlborough. Indeed; "on the battlefield, Marlborough's methods embodied all the ingredients of the best modern doctrine."⁶³ The two areas which have the most relevance are: mission command and command of the moral in war.

⁶² Belloc, *The Tactics & Strategy of the Great Duke of Marlborough*, 213.

⁶³ Holmes, *Marlborough: Britain's Greatest General*, 479.

Command of the Moral

The moral realm of warfare is concerned with the human element to war, the most important. As Napoleon stated; “In war the moral is to the material (physical) as three is to one.” The command of the moral encompasses both nebulous concepts and more tangible realities. The former are hard to measure, save to know that it is evident when they are absent. For example concepts such as leadership, “the ability to get people to fight” and to ultimately inspire great feats. The latter is concerned with the basic needs of the soldiers, ensuring that they are properly fed, sustained and equipped. The Duke of Marlborough mastered both.⁶⁴

The Duke of Marlborough had another name and this speaks to his absolute command of the moral in war; *Corporal John*. As Richard Holmes states; “there is a shamanistic quality to great generals which goes beyond wise strategy, solid logistics and successful tactics, enabling them to get straight to the hearts of the soldiers they command.”⁶⁵ Marlborough demanded great acts of his men, and they responded; the lengthy night march to Arleux in 1711 is a prime example, as was the storming of the Schellenberg in 1704. The soldiers under his command knew that Marlborough would not risk their lives without a greater purpose. Robert Parker wrote, after Marlborough conducted a personal reconnaissance of the French lines, deceiving them as to think he would attack; “I was now well satisfied, that he would not push the thing, unless he saw a strong probability of success; nor was this my notion alone; it was the sense of the whole army. Both officer and soldier, British and Foreigner.”⁶⁶ Marlborough led from the front, fought alongside his men, was there at the point of need, and, perhaps not most importantly, but certainly

⁶⁴ ADP Operations, 2-2, 2-10.

⁶⁵ Holmes, *Marlborough: Britain's Greatest General*, 480.

⁶⁶ Chandler, *Robert Parker and Comte de Merode Westerloo*, 108. Parker was commenting at the siege of Bouchain.

pertinent, he won.

His manner, especially his remarkable patience dealing with coalitions and setbacks, was crucial too in earning the trust and respect of his commanders and men. Marlborough was also smart enough to recognize that his soldiers and officers were key to success. These are all enduring aspects to leadership and John Keegan sums it up best:

“Corporal John,” as the soldiers called him, never wasted lives unnecessarily, or asked them to perform tasks that were not necessary. As a result, he could call for feats of courage and pertinacity greater than those given to any other general. In this combination of military virtues, Marlborough’s greatness nestled, but most of all in his understanding that the army was precious and that its value resided in the officers and men who made it up.⁶⁷

Furthermore, and impressively, as Robert Parker alludes to in his diary, this was not a British army; it was a multinational coalition. It did not matter, Marlborough and his leadership instilled in his soldiers a great will to fight. As Louise Hume Creighton noted, “He could manage men as well as he could manage armies.”⁶⁸ The bedrock to their will lay in Marlborough’s logistical and organizational abilities which were evident throughout the war, and perhaps especially so in 1704 and the march to the Danube. Marlborough along with key associates, ensured his troops were fed, paid, and supplied on an arduous march and, critically, that they were ready to fight on its completion. In addition, he took measures to improve medical provision and was constantly concerned by the welfare of his soldiers, as shown in his correspondence. Marlborough also, as he had demonstrated at Walcourt, trained and organized his troops to a high

⁶⁷ John Keegan and Andrew Wheatcroft, *Who’s Who in Military History* (London: Routledge 1996), 188-89.

⁶⁸ Creighton, *Life of John Churchill*, 326; Frederick William Orby Maycock, *An outline of Marlborough's campaigns: a brief and concise account* (New York: Macmillan, 1913), 178: “Surely it is one of his greatest triumphs that he wielded this cosmopolitan army into one harmonious force, actuated by an intense esprit de corps.”

standard throughout the war. All these factors ensured he commanded the moral during the war. Indeed, “In the last analysis, all of Marlborough’s victories depended on his being able to instill in his officers and men the confidence he possessed in the army’s ability to defeat the French.”⁶⁹

There is, however, another element to the moral in war and that is dominating the enemies’ moral aspect too. For nine years, Marlborough won time, and time again, against the French. They knew of his reputation and traits, a fact Marlborough was able to leverage to the utmost in his tenth campaign. Marshall Villars was no slouch, a proven commander, yet he allowed Marlborough’s reputation and skill to completely shape his actions and responses. Villars hesitated to attack Marlborough, not solely because of orders from Versailles, but also, even when the opportunity arose, the French will to take on Marlborough was lacking. Marlborough not only commanded the allied moral component of warfare; he also commanded the French.

Mission Command

Mission command is a relatively modern term, tracing its origins to the German “*Auftragstaktik*” in the nineteenth century. Mission command is a “philosophy of command, with centralised intent and decentralised execution.” It is underpinned by unity of effort, which “ensures the maximum synergy between the elements within a force,” trust, and mutual understanding.⁷⁰ The principles of unity of effort and decentralized execution in the tactical sphere are sound concepts and are widely accepted today as key enablers in the successful conduct of military operations. However, the act of mission command is older still.

Marlborough exercised mission command wherever possible with two caveats. First, the secrecy he attached to some of his major successes. This meant only a small cabal was aware of

⁶⁹ Jones, *Marlborough*, 233.

⁷⁰ ADP Operations, 6-10-6-13.

his plans, and therefore, intent. Understanding a commander's intent is a central pillar of mission command and it is certain, for example in the deception and subsequent passing of the lines of *Ne Plus Ultra*, that not all of Marlborough's commanders were aware of his intent. This contravenes modern best practice, although working in a coalition, there are always constraints as to which country is allowed to know what. This leads to the second caveat, namely that Marlborough did not trust all of his commanders, and coalition intricacies further heightened this aspect. However, when trusted, as several undoubtedly were, Marlborough's ability to allow them the freedom to tactically execute his intent is noteworthy.

Mission command also elucidates a key component of Marlborough's command of the moral, his execution of tactical action, as well as being a crucial consideration of operational art; logistics and organization. It was intrinsic to allied accomplishments throughout the war, for "Their success depended on logistical efficiency in providing food, forage, money for pay and subsistence, remounts, even new boots and clothing." The sophistication of the logistic organization was "unprecedented" and has contemporaneous relevance even now. However, what was different in Marlborough's day was that he "needed to concern himself daily with what seem today to be the most minute details of supply and administration."⁷¹

Marlborough, moreover, was greatly supported by his "shadow", Earl Cadogan. A relationship begun in 1690, was a constant throughout the war. There was no surprise who Marlborough entrusted with crucial moments in the campaign of 1711, J.N.P Watson notes, "as usual, Cadogan was allotted the most important roles." First it was Cadogan who, as head of the relief column for Arleux after it had been re-taken by the French, arrived deliberately late to

⁷¹ Jones, *Marlborough*, 231; Ivan P. Phelan, "Marlborough as a Logisticians" in *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 67, no. 272 (Spring 1989): 253-257, 257.

facilitate the deception. It was also he who took the causeway ahead of the arrival of the main body of forces, having been sent by Marlborough. He was completely trusted, an eminently capable subordinate who thrived under the centralized command, decentralized execution philosophy.⁷²

Earl Cadogan was the quartermaster, spymaster, and combat commander who deserves substantial credit for Marlborough's success in the War of the Spanish Succession. He was crucial in organizing the intelligence network, described as "greatest spy system the world had ever known." This gave Marlborough critical insights into the enemy's intentions and helped the design of his operations. Cadogan was there organizing the march to the Danube and convoy system in 1704 and beyond, reconnoitering before Ramillies and other great victories.⁷³ Their synergy was absolute. Indeed, Heinsius was quoted as saying: "Si vous voulez avoir un duc de Marlborough un Cadogan est Necessaire."

The relationship between Cadogan and Marlborough demonstrates how important mission command is in tactical execution. The commander cannot be in all places. Once a plan is unleashed, it depends on the officers and soldiers. A commander relies upon them for success. Subordinates must understand the commander's intent and execute, with the leeway to adapt as they see fit, within the bounds provided. Furthermore, he must be confident that this delegation will be successful. Marlborough's judge of character played a significant role, as well as his ability to engender loyalty amongst the majority of his coalition. However, it must not be forgotten that Marlborough was also disliked. The Comte de Merode Westerloo and Margrave of

⁷² J.N.P Watson, *Marlborough's Shadow: The life of the First Earl Cadogan* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper 2003), 8, vii, 157-159.

⁷³ Patricia Dickson, "A Brilliant Soldier: William 1st Earl of Cadogan" in *The Army Quarterly and Defence Journal* 106, no. 4 (October 1976): 415-422, 415.

Baden fell out with Marlborough during the course of the war.⁷⁴

A further example, although it can be considered in many respects a partnership, is his relationship with Prince Eugene; one of the great collaborations in the history of war and another example of mission command. Marlborough was always in command, but he trusted and consulted Eugene completely and constantly respectively. Although Eugene was absent from Flanders in 1711, his presence at Blenheim and other key battles during the war ensure that he must be mentioned in any discussion of Marlborough's mission command.

The Duke of Marlborough's use of mission command was not only amongst fellow commanders. At the siege at Bouchain for example, Colonel John Armstrong expertly carried out the siege in Marlborough's absence, orchestrating the works that led to Bouchain's eventual fall. Marlborough had to contend with Villars, as well as keep open difficult logistical resupply routes, crucial in supplying the ammunition for a siege, that were under constant threat from the French. Marlborough had an ability to pick the right men, empower them and reap the benefits of others' military skill allowing him more time to visualize and assess the campaign. He achieved this through setting the appropriate command climate. This was delegation not abrogation of responsibility. Marlborough took a keen interest in detail, especially in terms of concern for his soldiers. The combination of a command of the moral and mission command in tactical execution led to great success for Marlborough.⁷⁵

The Paradox of Failure

In 1711, Marlborough outmaneuvered a larger force, crossed the perceived impregnable lines of *Ne Plus Ultra* without the loss of a single soldier, before taking the fortress at Bouchain,

⁷⁴ Chidsey, *Marlborough*, 274; Watson, *Marlborough's Shadow*, vi.

⁷⁵ Chandler, *Robert Parker and Comte de Merode Westerloo*, 110.

while keeping logistical lines of communication open and fending off any French attempts to relieve the city. He achieved this after ten years of campaigning, dwindling support at home, out of favor with the Crown and with peace being clandestinely sought. Although there was no great battle such as Blenheim in 1704, 1711 was undoubtedly one of Marlborough's finest campaigns, and one where he was 'only' a military commander. However, England deserted its allies at this point in what William Pitt the Elder described as the "the indelible reproach of her age." Marlborough was undoubtedly a great strategist. Nevertheless, in 1711, political realities undermined Marlborough's military strategy for victory. There was a break in policy's flow down to the tactical level. This led to the isolation of Marlborough's strategy and, consequently, operational art.⁷⁶

The Tories revealed their true policy in late 1711. On 16 September, Marlborough received a letter from Robert Harley, who led the Tory ministry now in power after Godolphin's dismissal, which informed him that peace was being sought, yet did not outline how far progressed the negotiations were. Marlborough expressed satisfaction that this was the case, yet he was unaware of their terms. A substantial shift in politics and, correspondingly, in the policy had occurred. Although Marlborough had a plan for 1712 and seemed set to fight on, on 27 September the preliminaries were signed on seven articles that were to form the basis for the Treaty of Utrecht which finalized the peace in 1713.⁷⁷

At worst, the politicians double-crossed Marlborough; however, he was certainly kept in

⁷⁶ Chidsey, *Marlborough*, 281; Simms, *Three Victories and a Defeat*, 55. The shining example of this was his skill at keeping Charles and Sweden out of the war over the winter of 1707-08.

⁷⁷ William Coxe, *Memoirs of the Duke of Marlborough with his Original Correspondence*, vol. 3 (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1885), 245-248; Henry L. Snyder, *The Marlborough – Godolphin Correspondence*, vol. 3., 1638, 1678, 1684.

the dark. Nevertheless, this was not surprising. Previous peace overtures had failed, in 1706 and again in 1709, after the alliance was “arrogant” and demanded too much of Louis XIV. John Wade, who edited Coxe’s biography of Marlborough, describes Harley’s action as “politic” considering Marlborough’s involvement and allegiance to the alliance and the terms which had previously been rejected. Marlborough wanted peace, as shown by his correspondence, though it was a “peace on his own terms.” This was proved by the ensuing debates in London when Marlborough gave a speech to the House of Lords on 10 December, and stated; “I am of the same opinion with the rest of the Allies, that the safety and liberty of Europe will be in imminent danger if Spain and the West Indies are left to the House of Bourbon.” Marlborough was wrong.⁷⁸

The paradox of the 1711 campaign is Marlborough succeeded in accomplishing exactly what the British political leadership wanted. A military commander does not need to ‘win’ the war, to achieve the political aim. Marlborough had kept the pressure on the French and at the end of 1711, Robert Harley could negotiate from a position of strength and obtain favorable terms. However, this was done unwittingly. Marlborough’s military strategy was predicated on the defeat of France in Flanders.

Marlborough faltered because he pursued an unaccomplishable policy, exemplified by Spain and the “absurd” war aims. Barnett highlights Marlborough’s understanding of policy, the context, and its linkage to strategy, as well as his astute judgement. This is certainly true, and was in evidence in 1711; however, the politics evinced the temporal character of strategy formulation and an enduring paradox. Marlborough could not adapt because of two key factors. First, he had

⁷⁸ Sir Archibald Alison, *The Military life of John, Duke of Marlborough* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1848), 254; Coxe, *Memoirs of the Duke of Marlborough*, 254; Chidsey, *Marlborough*, 277.

lost honest dialogue with the political leadership. Second, the human element of strategy was revealed by his own flawed outlook, framed by decisively defeating the French, requiring time he simply did not have.⁷⁹

Nevertheless, as an operational artist Marlborough was superb in 1711, crafting tactical action to the successful accomplishment of an isolated strategic objective. Furthermore, his tactical acumen in 1711 highlights enduring characteristics any military leader should aspire to: command of the moral and use of mission command supported by sound organization and a solid grasp of logistics. Marlborough demonstrated in 1711, before the popularizing and enshrinement in doctrine of such concepts, that the best had always known that success lay in their mastering: “The piercing of the lines of Villars in 1711, just beyond the stretch where these lines followed the waters of the Scarpe River, was the greatest proof Marlborough ever gave of his genius. It is the more remarkable in that it was the last.”⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Barnett, *Marlborough*, 264; General Sir George Murray, ed. *The Letters of Dispatches of John Churchill, First Duke of Marlborough*, vol. 1 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), xi. Murray, describing the volume and breadth of Marlborough’s correspondence states: “his indefatigable industry, his knowledge of and his attention to the minutest matters, was not less remarkable than the comprehensiveness of his views in great affairs.”

⁸⁰ Belloc, *The Tactics & Strategy of the Great Duke of Marlborough*, 213.

Conclusion

It was called the War of the Spanish Succession, and its principal object was to keep a Bourbon from occupying the throne of Spain. But a Bourbon sat upon that throne even after the Peace of Utrecht. A Bourbon sits upon it today.

- Donald Barr Chidsey, *Marlborough: The Portrait of a Conqueror*

The allied war effort failed during the War of the Spanish Succession. However, for Great Britain the situation was different. The peace secured was tremendously advantageous and met the majority of the original policy objectives: territorial gains in Gibraltar and Nova Scotia gave great national strategic advantage; recognition of the Protestant succession eliminated the threat to the state itself; Great Britain maintained control of the balance of power; and trade rights were won. This outcome was not accomplished militarily, regardless of the conditions it may have set.⁸¹

The enlargement of allied war aims to include the conquest of Spain fatally undid the Duke of Marlborough. In many ways, Marlborough was a prisoner of his success. His military exploits meant that much was expected, and indeed accomplished. As Burton alludes to, diplomacy “should always be conducted within the limits set by military possibility.” Spain became unachievable, yet the war continued with no change in allied political aims. It is testament to Marlborough’s skill that, “he almost succeeded in achieving the impossible.” The impossible was a decisive defeat of France, which meant invasion. However, the character of warfare and means available arguably precluded this course.⁸²

A decisive defeat and invasion of France, Lynn would argue, was contrary to the “abiding

⁸¹ Hattendorf, *England in the War of the Spanish Succession*, 269-271: “Although the means [military to political/diplomatic] to this goal were altered in 1711, the goal was achieved.” The English/ British method in the war was also to become the ‘British Way of Warfare’ for the next two centuries.

⁸² Burton, *The Captain General*, 193-194.

limitations” of warfare at this time. The means at Marlborough’s disposal also could not have achieved the unaccomplishable aim he wedded himself to. Attrition, sieges, and incremental gain secured the vital barrier, but would not win the war. Although, in many regards this reality lay outside of Marlborough’s control despite his manifold efforts. A cursory warning, frequently neglected, to every military commander that the character of warfare will determine both what is achievable, and what should be sought, in dialogue with political masters.

Marlborough, however, came very close to overcoming these constraints. Fortescue and Taylor argue the fault lay with the “unspeakable Dutch deputies” who had wrecked earlier campaigns.⁸³ However, the Dutch had valid concerns. Furthermore, each alliance member, as Rupert Smith highlighted, had different aims. The necessity of an alliance for England, a cornerstone of its policy, meant that the constraints this placed upon Marlborough’s campaigns had to be accepted. Marlborough certainly knew this.

Furthermore, with historical hindsight, the War of the Spanish Succession must be seen as a part of a continuum of wars during this period. The war cannot be analyzed in isolation from the crucial context. This meant that continuing advantage with accrued benefits was the best that could be achieved with the limiting character of warfare and, crucially, the European system at this time. The end of the war was also not the politicians’ fault. The manner in which peace was sought was poor and harmful; however, the Tories obviously felt they could not trust Marlborough and acted out of the interests of the state. The result and gains from the Treaty of Utrecht vindicated this approach.

⁸³ John William Fortescue, *History of the British Army*, vol. 1, (London MacMillan and Co, 1910), 555; Taylor, *Marlborough’s Wars*, 120-125, 83: “ ‘If the forces at the disposal of the Allies had been placed under the unfettered control of a military genius of the first order in these campaigns he would have made an end of the exorbitant power of France. If Marlborough and Eugene had been fortunate enough to wield the political authority of a Frederick or Napoleon, the war would have been conducted with a single eye to the destruction of the enemy.’”

Although politics may not set an endstate, they will decide when war ends. To ensure the best possible synchronization, there must be political-military dialogue at the outset, and continually throughout, to ensure an appropriate military strategy. In contemporary conflict, arguably all commanders must be aware of the strategy and its underpinnings in policy and the ideology of the state. The formulation of military strategy, however, rests with senior leadership and the question of whether they should become wedded, as Marlborough did, to unaccomplishable policy is debatable. For example, the political aims of the Afghanistan campaign, as they were initially visualized, expanded to include the establishment of a representative democracy, and other Western normative ideals. If military success is judged against these policy objectives, failure will undoubtedly ensue from a military standpoint. This then raises questions of feasibility and the measurement of success.

Simply, success is not measured militarily. It is assessed against the political outcome. Paradoxes abound and endure in war, and it is certainly mendacious to suggest military victories are inconsequential. Indeed, the War of the Spanish Succession showed that although great military success may not achieve victory, it attains great advantages. However, only when it is accepted that tactical action, for a military strategic object, is an instrument and shapes, yet should not govern, policy. The military commander and politicians must have an open and honest discussion on what is feasible and what military options are available. This does not eliminate the possibility that the military will be used in roles alien to their make-up or have to pursue ambitious or ambiguous policies. However, it may eliminate from the table unachievable aims and highlight the necessity for continual reassessment while seeking the desired outcome. Marlborough constantly reassessed, or reframed, his outlook tactically. However, he did not know, or was unwilling to recognize, that the policy and aims of the war had changed. Although, as the war proved, often aiming for the unachievable actually results in unparalleled success. Marlborough had the power to have this discussion; not in 1711, but certainly until 1707 when he

thereafter “was content to withdraw himself from the centre of the diplomatic and political arena.”⁸⁴

Therefore, Marlborough teaches the need for strategic thought to be taught early and continuously. The Duke of Marlborough implicitly understood the nature of the political scene in Great Britain. In turn, banned from court, imprisoned, lauded, and exiled, Marlborough knew the context. Although his gifts undeniably betrayed him as time went on, the almost inconceivable burdens he carried for ten years provide plenty of mitigation. When the Duke of Marlborough took command he was well versed from the tactical to the strategic and throughout the war he was interested in all theaters, every plan, and their impacts.⁸⁵ Although an upbringing in court and replication of his formative experiences is unfeasible today, this does not lessen the need for an awareness of military strategy; its placement and role, at the earliest possible opportunity. Strategic skill, knowledge and expertise must be honed through practical experience and education. The formulation and execution of strategy, as well as its character, rests in human aspects and an individual’s skill. A strategic leader is not born, rather cultivated. However, this is still no guarantee of success, as evidenced by the faltering of an experienced and expert strategic leader such as Marlborough.

Marlborough’s traits in command and his continued accessibility are also noteworthy. Marlborough was a great commander, and, as John Keegan highlighted, his success lay in the mastering of the basics and recognizing the preeminence of the human aspect in war. The Duke of Marlborough maximized fighting power; this is his indisputable greatness. The importance he placed upon training, equipping, and sustaining his force endure to the present day. His use of

⁸⁴ Burton, *The Captain General*, 195.

⁸⁵ Col. Arthur Parnell, *The War of the Succession in Spain* (London: George Bell, 1888), 40-42.

expeditionary logistics facilitated his many successes and led directly to his command of the moral. There is a contemporaneous heavy emphasis on technology, and weaponry; however, none of this matters if soldiers are unwilling to fight. Marlborough's leadership ensured that, for ten years, he inspired great feats of arms and, by extension, utterly dominated the enemy.

The enabling mechanism was mission command. Marlborough's magnanimous character, patience, flexibility of mind, philosophical approach, ability to foster loyalty and trust, with a willingness to delegate, meant that he achieved greatness.⁸⁶ The role of Earl Cadogan, Prince Eugene, and others, are all testament to Marlborough's character, relatively unique at this time, to ignore ego in order to work with others and harness their skills.

The last key lesson lies in Marlborough's ability as an operational artist. Operational art links and facilitates the flow from strategy to tactical execution. It accomplishes the desired outcome through orchestration of tactical action; based on a commander's skill, and his design and management of an operation. For ten years, although with barren ones, for example 1703, Marlborough designed and managed campaigns in which he was never defeated. His knowledge of policy and what was possible tactically enabled his artistry. His subsequent visualization was peerless. Indeed, "Perhaps among his [Napoleon] predecessors only Marlborough had shown a comparable capacity to visualize a campaign as a whole instead of as a series of discrete sieges and battles."⁸⁷

The campaign of 1711 is so interesting because Marlborough unconsciously achieved exactly what was required by the politicians. This makes for a confused final assessment of Marlborough. He did not isolate himself in an operational level vacuum, as modern doctrine leads

⁸⁶ Coxe, *Memoirs of the Duke of Marlborough* vol. 3, 432.

⁸⁷ Michael Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 83.

many to conclude, ignoring strategy and policy, settling for mere tactical success. Marlborough embraced the object, and set out each year to direct military force to its accomplishment. Unfortunately however, his strategy by 1711 had become isolated. It was based on outdated policies that had evolved. At this juncture, even Marlborough's sound strategic mind, his operational artistry, the best of his, or perhaps of any, time, nor his brilliant leadership and execution of tactical action could mask this fact.

The Duke of Marlborough faltered as he sought decisive strategic victory through epochal constrained military operations in a single theater of war. This was not, despite Marlborough's unparalleled success, to be sufficient militarily to win the entire war he envisaged. However, Marlborough's successes transcend the events of 1711 and the war itself. In correspondence with Godolphin, Marlborough said of peace; "Whatever is good for my country I shall always wish and pray for."⁸⁸ Marlborough did not live long enough to see the fruition of his efforts during the War of the Spanish Succession. However, good did come to his country, and his wishes and prayers were fulfilled in no small part due to his greatness as a commander and leader of men in war, much as "The destruction of the Armada had preserved the life of Britain."⁸⁹ The culmination of Marlborough's career in 1711 established Britain on the path to empire, and as the holder of the balance of power in Europe for over two hundred years.

⁸⁸ Snyder, *The Marlborough – Godolphin Correspondence* vol. 3, 1680.

⁸⁹ Churchill, *Marlborough: His Life and Times* vol. 2, 478-9.

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