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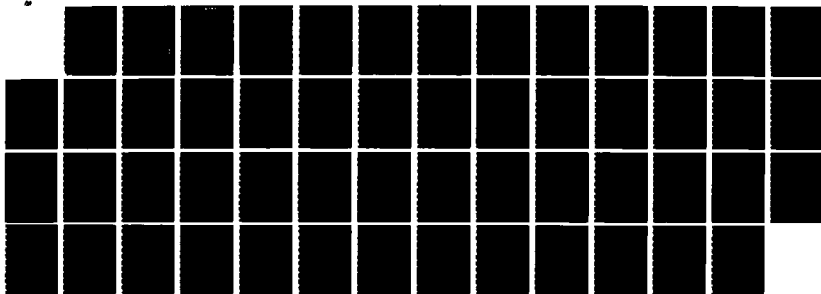
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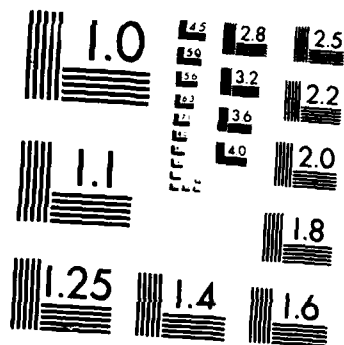
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THE OPERATIONAL COMMANDER'S WILL: AN  
INTANGIBLE ELEMENT IN VICTORY

by

Major Phillip L. Brinkley  
Field Artillery

School of Advanced Military Studies  
U.S. Army Command and General Staff College  
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

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## ABSTRACT

THE OPERATIONAL COMMANDER'S WILL: AN INTANGIBLE ELEMENT IN VICTORY, by Major Phillip L. Brinkley, USA, 49 PAGES.

No commander can win a campaign by himself; however, campaigns are won or lost in part because of the personal strengths and weaknesses of a commander. Military theorists have long recognized an intangible quality in all victorious commanders: the burning desire, the single-minded tenacity to accomplish the goal. This intangible quality is the operational commander's will.

The study investigates the role of the operational commander's will during wartime. The monograph focuses on the differences between an obstinate commander and a determined commander, using General Douglas Haig and General William Slim as case studies. The monograph draws inferences from the operational commander's will and applies the implications with respect to the U.S. Army today.

The monograph concludes that there would be significant benefit for the U.S. Army to identify potential operational commanders who not only have character, but who are determined and not obstinate. Additionally, the study concludes that most U.S. Army senior-level leaders have demonstrated at some point in their careers that they possess the quality of character, the ability to maintain constant and stable views regardless of external pressures. Coupled with character, a senior-level military leader must have flexibility of mind, the ability to shift mental gears under pressure without confusion of purpose in order to be a determined operational commander.

**THE OPERATIONAL COMMANDER'S WILL; AN  
INTANGIBLE ELEMENT IN VICTORY**

by

**Major Phillip L. Brinkley  
Field Artillery**

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Fort Leavenworth, Kansas**

**16 May 1986**

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*author*

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## THE OPERATIONAL COMMANDER'S WILL: AN INTANGIBLE ELEMENT IN VICTORY

### I. INTRODUCTION

The human heart is the starting point for all matters pertaining to war.<sup>1</sup>

Very little has been written concerning the qualities and prerequisites for senior leaders. While Field Manual 22-100, Military Leadership, discusses fundamentals that apply to leaders of all ranks, it is primarily a publication for developing basic leadership skills. Unfortunately, there presently is not an approved U.S. publication which specifies the qualities necessary for senior-level leadership.<sup>2</sup> One special quality of the senior-level leader that all officers should understand is the operational commander's will.

No commander can win a campaign by himself; however, campaigns are won or lost in part because of the personal strengths or weaknesses of a commander. Military theorists have long recognized an intangible quality in all victorious commanders: the burning desire, the single-minded tenacity to accomplish the goal. General Sir Archibald Wavell, for example, is one among several who have opined that the highest quality of a commander is "the fighting spirit, the will to win."<sup>3</sup>

An operational commander cannot consistently be victorious without the will to win. However, the commander's will connotes more than an obsession for victory. A commander must also have a concept or a vision that allows him to plan, to communicate his intent, and to be mentally prepared to insure effective execution of his desires.\* The commander's vision allows him to have an intense, imaginative drive to accomplish a mission with all available assets, rather than an inflexible adherence to a plan or an objective.

The purpose of this monograph is to investigate the role of the operational commander's will during wartime. The study focuses on the differences between an inflexible, obstinate commander and a tenacious, determined commander, using General Douglas Haig and General William Slim respectively as case studies. The monograph draws inferences from and implications of operational commander's will with respect to the U.S. Army today.

Before the study continues, certain terms pertaining to commanders need definitions: will, character, determination, and obstinacy. Throughout the monograph, the operational commander's will means "a man's habitual way of formulating and carrying out a course of action."<sup>2</sup> Decisiveness and resolve characterize the operational commander's will. A commander's character, best defined by Carl von Clausewitz, is the "ability to keep one's head at times of exceptional stress and violent emotion."<sup>3</sup> The stereotype of a strong

character is that of a person who has a great drive, who is clear cut and prompt in making decisions. The term "character" applies only to commanders whose views are constant and stable regardless of external factors. Napoleon understood the value of character in his commanders:

The first quality for a commander is a cool head, which receives a correct impression of things. He should not allow himself to be confused by either good or bad news. The impressions which he receives in the course of a day should classify themselves in his mind in such a way as to occupy the place which they merit, for reason and judgment are the result of the comparison of impressions taken into just consideration.<sup>7</sup>

A determined commander is a man of character who is capable of changing his mind. The ability of a man of character to change his mind occurs only if he has a strong belief in overriding truths or tested principles. A determined operational commander, with a clear conviction that tested principles apply in a particular situation, will alter his original course of action. W.J. Wood, writing in Leaders and Battles, believes that determination is "reflective intelligence, undertaking a bold action."<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, an obstinate commander is a man of character not capable of changing his mind. An obstinate commander orients his will on being resolute, without reflective thought. Clausewitz states that character "turns to obstinacy as soon as a man resists another point of view,

not from his superior insight,...but because he objects instinctively."<sup>9</sup>

Success or failure in a campaign is not grounds for assessing whether a commander is determined or obstinate. An obstinate commander with good judgment may be victorious. An obstinate commander with bad judgment is destined to fail. The problem lies in the fact that commanders frequently make judgments based on scanty information. If the commander receives additional, overwhelming evidence that runs counter to his original concepts, then he must be flexible enough to change his mind while an obstinate commander would refuse. Certain factors do indicate whether certain commanders are obstinate or determined:

a. Leadership style. Does the operational commander lead or dominate? Leadership is "a process of mutual stimulation which by effective interplay of relevant differences, guides human energy in the pursuit of a common cause."<sup>10</sup> Conversely, domination is "a process of control in which by the assertion of superiority a person regulates the activities of others for purposes of his own choosing."<sup>11</sup>

b. Personality. What characteristics, behavior, traits, values, self-concepts and emotional patterns form an individual's unique adjustment to life?<sup>12</sup>

c. Courage. Courage is the "triumph of will power over fear."<sup>13</sup> Clausewitz notes two kinds of courage: "courage in the face of personal danger, and courage to

accept responsibility."<sup>14</sup> In this monograph, courage means the operational commander's ability to accept responsibility and the nature of the commander's response to failure.

d. Intelligence. Intelligence is energy engaged in solving problems. Intellect comprises three elements: imagination, flexibility of mind, and judgment. Imagination, by itself, produces nothing but images in the mind; therefore, "imagination, unless it leads to innovation in a practical way, is useless."<sup>15</sup> Flexibility of mind, according to W.J. Wood, is the "ability to shift mental gears under pressure without confusion of purpose."<sup>16</sup> Judgment is the ability to make a sound assessment of the known data and decide upon a practical course of action. These four factors, considered in combination with one another, assist in understanding the operational commander's will.

## II. AN OBSTINATE COMMANDER -- Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig

Stubbornness is, in fact, only a dull man's substitute for resolution.<sup>1</sup>

### Background Overview

World War I evokes images of trench warfare, static lines, wholesale butchery of soldiers, and incompetent general officers. World War I was a war of attrition, a test of each side's resources and endurance. The command philosophy of the allied generals was expressed by Ferdinand Foch: "A battle cannot be lost physically...it can only be lost morally....A battle won is a battle in which one will not confess oneself beaten."<sup>2</sup>

The Commander-in-Chief of British Forces in France, Sir Douglas Haig, understood the World War I concept that to make war means always attacking.<sup>3</sup> At the outbreak of World War I, Lucky Haig, as he was known, was in command of I Corps at Aldershot. The I Corps was earmarked to spearhead the British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.) on the continent. In early 1915, General Haig received command of First Army when the B.E.F. reorganized into two armies. By 19 December 1915, General Haig had succeeded General French as commander-in-chief--a turn of events aided no doubt by Haig's secret dispatches to King George V concerning French's military leadership.<sup>4</sup>

General Haig's first major test as a commander-in-chief was the Battle of the Somme. Britain had assembled a volunteer army of several million soldiers, referred to as

"Kitchener's Army." On the first day of the attack, 1 July 1916, Britain lost 60,000 men. When the battle ended in November, the British had sustained 400,000 casualties. The attritional style of war conducted by General Haig forecast his approach to the problems of World War I. When the French commander, Joffre, and Haig wanted to renew the attack in mid-November, both governments in London and Paris vetoed the demands.

Haig's next two major battles, the Battle of Arras (April 1917) and the Third Battle of Ypres (July-November 1917), also produced significant British losses without any apparent gain. The Third Battle of Ypres, commonly referred to by World War I soldiers as Passchendaele, is a prominent example of Douglas Haig's pursuit of unattainable goals even at the price of the destruction of his own armies.<sup>9</sup> This single battle clearly demonstrates General Haig's obstinacy.

On 2 June 1917, General Pétain, the French Commander-in-Chief, informed General Haig that a substantial portion of the French Army had mutinied. At best, Pétain indicated, he could persuade the French soldiers to go back to the trenches to defend the line. Because the French obviously could not support the British in defeating the Germans without time to correct their internal problems, Haig decided that the Third Battle of Ypres would give the French the needed time. In a letter written to General Charteris on 5 March 1927 in response to Churchill's criticism of Haig



over the Passchendaele operation, Haig defended his position:

It is impossible for Winston to know how the possibility of the French Army breaking up in 1917 compelled me to go on attacking....You even did not know the facts, as Pétain told them to me in confidence.<sup>6</sup>

The facts as Pétain told them to General Haig must have been so confidential that they were unknown to heads of state. British Prime Minister Lloyd George and the French leader Clemenceau both tried to restrain Haig from the offensive.<sup>7</sup> Lloyd George commented that if Haig launched the offensive, the danger was that the Germans would "bring their best men and guns and all their ammunition against the British Army."<sup>8</sup> Norman Dixon, writing in On the Psychology of Military Incompetence, states:

This [Pétain desiring a large scale offensive] is not true. Pétain wanted a small action to keep the Germans busy, not a great offensive which might reduce the British Army to the same state of demoralization as his own.<sup>9</sup>

Assuming the unlikely event that General Haig did have special knowledge of the French Army, the next question becomes, why an offensive at Passchendaele? General Haig indicated that, during private conversations with British Admiral Jellicoe, Passchendaele was selected.<sup>10</sup> Jellicoe stated that unless the British captured the Belgian ports of Ostend and Zeebrugge the war could not go on. Jellicoe's rationale was that the British Army could "strike a blow at the German submarine fleet."<sup>11</sup> Hence, the ultimate

objectives of the Third Battle of Ypres were the Belgium ports.

The rationale of Passchendaele to support the British navy was unsound because the British navy knew very well that most German submarines operated not out of Ostend or Zeebrugge, but out of German home ports. Because this information was readily available to General Haig<sup>12</sup> the indication is that Haig was looking for any argument to conduct the offensive.<sup>13</sup>

General Haig formulated the plan for the Third Battle of Ypres without direct input from his two army commanders. Haig instructed an aide to show the two commanders the basic plan: "Record their comments but do not incorporate them in the plan."<sup>14</sup> In a conference on 14 June with his army commanders, Haig personally outlined his future operation and stated that there would be no departure from the plans he had outlined.<sup>15</sup> The basic plan had three parts (see map 1, page 10):

A) Capture the bridgehead formed by the Passchendaele-Staden-Clercken ridge.

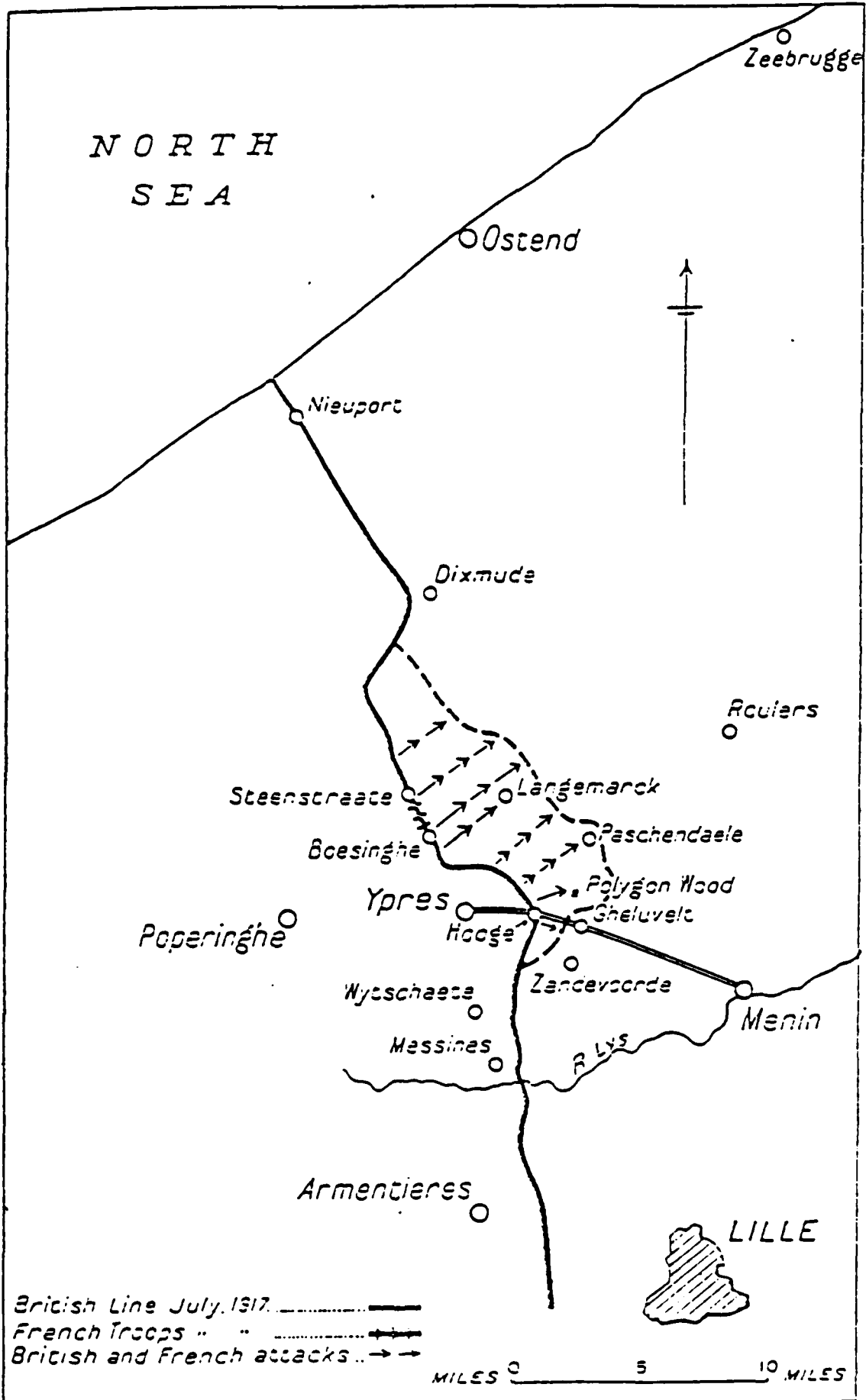
B) Push on towards Rouler-Thourout, so as to take the German coast defense in the rear.

C) Land by surprise on the Ostend front in conjunction with an attack from Nieuport.

D) Depending on resources, halt after (a) is gained.<sup>16</sup>

The arguments against Passchendaele were impressive. Liddell-Hart wrote that Haig had chosen a spot "most

# BATTLE OF PASSCHENDAELE AUGUST - NOVEMBER, 1917



difficult for himself and least vital to the enemy."<sup>17</sup> Both of Haig's army commanders had claimed there would be too little room behind and below the city of Ypres to assemble the assault divisions, to mass the weapons for an artillery preparation, and to maintain the secrecy Haig demanded. Second, Haig's intelligence service knew that the Germans expected an offensive. Finally, the soil surrounding Ypres was not conducive to mobility because the water table lay only three feet below the surface and only an extensive drainage system kept the area from being a soupy marsh.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Haig's meteorological advisors had warned of an abnormally heavy rainfall.<sup>19</sup> As predicted, the precipitation for the month of August 1917 was twice as high as normal. The months of September and October also had very heavy rainfalls. The rainfall and an extensive artillery barrage--on the British side alone there was one gun for every five yards of front--destroyed the drainage system. The complete area around Passchendaele became a sea of mud. Although Haig knew all these facts before the offensive began, his obstinacy apparently prevented his changing his plan of attack.

Then during the offensive, when British casualty figures began to rise significantly and the mud made the likelihood of a successful attack very minimal, both of Haig's army commanders, Plumer and Gough, recommended that Haig "close down the Ypres offensive."<sup>20</sup> But Haig obstinately refused.

The Third Battle of Ypres produced approximately 400,000 British casualties. On 6 November 1917 Passchendaele village was captured. The final attack occurred on 10 November 1917 to fortify the British position along Passchendaele Ridge. The British line now had a significant bulge. All the gains were abandoned without a fight in order to shorten the lines, when the Germans attacked in the following year.<sup>21</sup>

General Haig manufactured excuses about the importance of the Passchendaele offensive. He stated that the primary purpose of the offensive was to divert the Germans from the mutinous French Army. Evidence shows Pétain did not want a great offensive, but merely small actions to keep the Germans busy. Haig further claimed that Admiral Jellicoe needed the capture of German submarine ports of Ostend and Zeebrugge to continue the naval war. First, the major German submarine ports were in Germany, not in Belgium. Second, Jellicoe's concern proved to be unfounded, because although the ports remained under German control, Britain remained in the war. The Ypres offensive occurred without planning involvement of the two army commanders. Later, both army commanders recommended a halt to the offensive, to no avail. After massive casualties, the first objective, the Passchendaele ridge, was captured only to be returned to the Germans one year later without a fight. The reason for Haig's actions was that he had decided that the Ypres

offensive was the place where Britain could win the war. Criticism only made Haig more obstinate.<sup>22</sup>

#### Evaluation of General Haig's Will

One could argue that if Douglas Haig was such an obstinate commander, then he should have been relieved from command. Unfortunately, because General Haig was extremely popular, the British Prime Minister did not remove him for political reasons:

Lloyd George depended on Unionist support in the House of Commons and the Unionists were basically strong supporters of Robertson and Haig, though many of them were shaken by the enormous casualties suffered by the British Army for such poor visible results. Lloyd George did not dare to remove these two generals.<sup>23</sup>

In the ranks, Douglas Haig was by far the most popular British commander<sup>24</sup> in World War I because he embodied what the British soldier expected his officer to be: a gentleman. His reckless arrogance seemed to add to rather than detract from his image.

Popularity, however, does not necessarily equal effective leadership; in fact, Haig dominated rather than led. Haig justified his dominating because he felt ordained to lead the British armies to final victory. Haig truly believed that he "was the chosen instrument of a Higher Power for a great purpose...."<sup>25</sup> The perceived inherent superiority resulting from this special calling, so Haig seemed to think, was his mandate to dominate, regardless of the opinions of others.

Douglas Haig could not communicate with his superiors or subordinates in clear, concise terms. During his entire life, Haig could never conduct an intelligent conversation with people he did not know. Likewise, he could never speak to large groups or reporters effectively. Obviously, the inability to transmit his thoughts affected his military operations:

When summarizing military operations, he was often quite ineffective and at times liable to prejudice his cause by being unable to state it to advantage: even in the Great War Army Commanders would reluctantly admit they sometimes had much difficulty in deriving a clear understanding of his instructions or wishes.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, General Haig was not an effective leader because he did not have the compassion necessary to identify with the immediate goals of his subordinates. General Haig, a commander responsible for more than one million casualties during the war, could not witness the suffering of others. He felt it was his duty to refrain from visiting the casualty clearing stations because the visits made him physically ill.<sup>27</sup> In addition, General Haig rarely ventured from his comfortable headquarters in the rear to visit or to speak to the soldiers in the trenches.<sup>28</sup> Although Haig was aware of the conditions on the front lines, he did very little to acknowledge the suffering or show some appreciation for his soldiers' sacrifices for his inane plans.

Obviously, General Haig's personality was that of a highly ambitious individual who set his own personal

standards without regard for the opinions or feelings of others. Liddell-Hart states that General Haig, "in his qualities and defects, was the very embodiment of the national character and army tradition."<sup>27</sup> Undoubtedly, Haig would desire to be remembered in the terms that connote a fine British officer and a gentleman.

General Haig's courage to accept responsibility is unquestioned. After the war, Haig returned to private life and devoted himself to the affairs of ex-servicemen through the British Legion. He did not, as many other commanders did, write books trying to vindicate his actions, nor did he make speeches blaming other people for his shortcomings, perhaps, of course, because of his inability to communicate effectively.

Probably General Haig's greatest deficiency was his intellectual rigidity. He found it extremely difficult to act upon information that did not agree with his system of beliefs. Having closed his mind to new information, he did not have a fertile imagination to compensate for actual events. Method dominated his mind, and where he failed was in "originality of concepts, fertility of resources, and receptivity of ideas."<sup>30</sup>



III. A Determined Commander --  
Field Marshall William J. Slim

As each man's strength gives out, as it no longer responds to his will, the inertia of the whole gradually comes to rest on the commander's will alone. The ardor of his spirit must rekindle the flame of purpose in all others; his inward fire must revive their hopes.<sup>1</sup>

Background Overview

The British Fourteenth Army in the China-Burma-India theater was labeled by Stuart Emeny of the News Chronicle as the 'Forgotten Army'.<sup>2</sup> Many English citizens had no idea that there was a British Army in Burma. It is not surprising, considering newspaper headlines reported on the majority of British and U.S. soldiers fighting in North Africa, Italy, and on the European continent. Many Allies believed that Burma was in an obscure part of the world and, in view of the German threat, it seemed insignificant. However, the importance of Burma was twofold. First, Burma was the Allied land link with China through the Burma Road. Second, Burma was considered the eastern shield of India against Japanese encroachment by virtue of its geographic location.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of Burma did not occur to the British War Office until the Japanese invaded the country. For example, within a sixteen-month period prior to the Japanese attack in January 1942, there were five separate superior headquarters answerable for Burma's defense.<sup>4</sup> The result of this military mismanagement was that no clear strategic or

operational objectives had been established for the Allied forces in Burma.

By early 1942, Rangoon had fallen to the Japanese. The Japanese, of course, were able to use the port to resupply and reinforce troops. In February, the 17<sup>th</sup> Indian Division of the British Imperial Forces was severely mauled in a retreat across the Sittang River, as the Japanese pushed to control Central Burma. Amidst the fighting, British Far East Command decided to reorganize the Burma front by placing the 17<sup>th</sup> Indian Division and the 1<sup>st</sup> Burma Division under the control of the newly formed I Corps (Burcorps). The designated commanding officer of Burcorps was Lieutenant General William Slim.

General Slim had started his World War duty as a brigade commander fighting the Italians on the Sudan-Abyssinia border. Shortly thereafter, he was promoted to major general and assumed command of the British 10<sup>th</sup> Indian Division. As the 10<sup>th</sup> Division commander, he saw wartime desert duty in Iraq, Syria, and Persia. Undoubtedly, General Slim was upset about leaving the desert fighting and the 10<sup>th</sup> Division in order to assume command of a new corps fighting in the jungle of Burma. Slim commented, "The desert suits the British, and so does fighting in it. You can see your man."<sup>9</sup>

When General Slim arrived in Burma on 19 March 1942, the military situation was dismal. Lacking further guidance from higher headquarters, the Allied forces in Burma had

decided to defend and delay everywhere, from Tumor to Tennasserium.<sup>6</sup> This was an extremely poor decision, considering there were insufficient forces to conduct a successful static defense. Furthermore, local indigenous personnel were not used to assist British troops or bolster the defense of Burma. The British forces occasionally attempted to seize the initiative by conducting offensive operations within the strategic defense. Unfortunately, the British were not capable of performing any form of operational maneuver or conducting combined arms warfare because they were completely road bound. An advancing division might be led by a couple of men or a tank, followed by a column stretching several miles.

Other operational and tactical problems existed for Burcorps: no air cover, poor intelligence, inadequate training, limited communications, and a major morale problem based on the myth of Japanese invincibility in jungle fighting. The British air situation was deplorable; from Slim's viewpoint, his corps had no air defense, support, or reconnaissance. Everything in the sky was Japanese.<sup>7</sup> Solving the problem of intelligence and communication required materiel, resources, training, and time. With commitments in Europe and the Middle East, Britain would not be able to spare the manpower and equipment for a massive offensive action against the Japanese until late 1943. Slim stated, "Tactically we had been completely out classed. The Japanese could--and did--do many things we could not."<sup>8</sup> By

mid-May 1942, Burcorps, under General Slim's leadership, had suffered a series of misfortunes that culminated in the British retreat from Burma. Burcorps had withdrawn more than 1,000 miles in two months, had suffered 13,000 casualties, and had lost much of their heavy equipment. The men of Burcorps were physically and mentally exhausted when they reached Imphal, India. General Slim later described the condition of I Corps:

As the wasted units marched wearily into Imphal, through the sheets of monsoon rain, they were directed into areas of jungle on the steep hillside and told to bivouac there. It seemed that no preparation at all had been made for their reception. They had arrived in the soaked, worn and filthy clothing they stood up in; they had no blankets, no waterproof sheets, no tentage;...no adequate water or medical arrangements....The slogan in India seemed to be 'Isn't that Burma Army annihilated yet?'

During the retreat from Burma everyone was surprised by the confident methods and tactics of the Japanese. The British troops were cynical and rumors spread of the deficiency of Allied equipment, training and leadership. The Japanese appeared as a hard, highly mobile, super-efficient force.<sup>10</sup> In reality, the whole machinery of the British Army had virtually collapsed.<sup>11</sup>

General Slim was a defeated commander. His self esteem was extremely low, as indicated by his statement, "I had little to be proud of; I could not rate my generalship high...I had succeeded in nothing I attempted."<sup>12</sup> However, the measure of a commander's character is the ability to reason at times of exceptional stress. A commander must

have the ability to see all sides of a question and to eliminate his biases. Although commanders can--and, perhaps, should--learn from their mistakes, many commanders cannot. Slim gives a poignant example of why many generals do not learn from a defeat.

He will see himself for what his is--a defeated general. In a dark hour he will turn in upon himself and question the foundation of his leadership and manhood. And then he must stop! For if he is ever to command in battle again, he must shake off these regrets, and stamp on them as they claw at his will and self confidence...[he must] cast out the doubts born of failure.<sup>13</sup>

Slim had the ability to cast out his doubts born of failure. He applied imagination, mental flexibility, and judgment to solve the problems of a defeated British Army. When Burcorps reached Imphal, India, the corps was disbanded. General Slim was reassigned as the commander of the newly formed XV Corps. In October 1943, in another reorganization shuffle, Slim took command of the newly formed British Fourteenth Army. General Slim was occupied with the preparation of his units as a combat organization for most of 1942 and 1943. His ability to analyze the deficiencies of his units, to learn from his mistakes, and to take corrective actions made him a determined commander.

General Slim recognized that the first problem he had to correct was his units' morale. General Slim understood that morale is a mental condition, an attitude exhibited in the zeal for action toward a goal.<sup>14</sup> In 1943, as the commander of defeated British troops, General Slim outlined the foundations of morale in the order of importance:

spiritual, intellectual, and material.<sup>15</sup> However, outlining the elements of morale was only one part of establishing his leadership throughout the command. Slim needed the tenets of morale understood and applied by soldiers throughout his command in order for his units to be combat effective.

The spiritual foundation that Slim imbued throughout his unit rested on the fact that the British Army fought for a just cause. When an army loses faith in a cause, it will be defeated.<sup>16</sup> Soldiers must believe they are fighting for a cause worthy of the supreme sacrifice, if necessary. Regardless of what may happen to them as individuals, the cause would prevail. In Slim's view the British cause appeared thus:

We coveted no man's country; we wished to impose no form of government on any nation. We fought for the clean, the decent, the free things of life, for the right to live our lives in our own way, as others could live theirs, to worship God in what faith we chose, to be free in body and mind, and for our children to be free. We fought only because the powers of evil had attacked these things.<sup>17</sup>

In order to relate the spiritual foundation to his command, Slim used a direct approach to the individual man himself.<sup>18</sup> General Slim spent approximately one-third of his time talking with his soldiers. He spoke with every single combat unit and often completed three or four speeches a day. He later wrote, "I was in the first few months more like a parliamentary candidate than a general--except I never made a promise."<sup>19</sup> In addition, he sought to make every individual soldier feel a useful part of his

command. Because he thought soldiers would feel more useful if they knew the overall military situation, Slim took the imaginative approach of establishing two information centers--the War Room and the Information Room. The War Room was restricted to principal staff officers. The Information Room was open to all soldiers. The Information Room gave data on the operations of various corps, adjacent units, and the war in general. Slim firmly believed that the benefits of a soldier's knowing how what they did fit into the whole war effort far outweighed any security risks.

Slim also understood that morale had an intellectual element. Intellectually, an unspoken social contract exists between the commander and his soldiers. Soldiers comprehend the risk involved at the tactical level of war and are generally willing to suffer the dangers and hardships. However, soldiers expect that the commander will not expend their lives uselessly. An element of this social contract is that a soldier must believe that an objective is attainable.

Unfortunately, the fear of Japanese invincibility permeated Slim's command. The British Army in Burma had an unbroken record of defeat.<sup>20</sup> General Slim realized that talking and education alone could not destroy this myth of Japanese invincibility. Only a practical demonstration of military success would cure the problem. Unfortunately, however, because of the state of training and the troops' lack of confidence in themselves, his army was not capable

of a victory in a large-scale operation. Therefore, Slim began to change attitudes on a small scale. He began by emphasizing the need for aggressive patrolling to regain the initiative from the enemy and to restore the offensive spirit of the Fourteenth Army. Slim accomplished this by revising the soldiers' outlook toward the jungle and by improving the troops' fighting techniques. Slim taught soldiers that the jungle was ideal fighting terrain because it provided the Fourteenth Army the advantage of cover and concealment. He also destroyed old concepts regarding front lines. If, for example, as he explained, Japanese forces were to the rear of an allied unit, it was the Japanese that were surrounded, not the allied soldiers.<sup>21</sup>

The aggressive patrolling paid large dividends, and improved morale in the Fourteenth Army. Patrols came back to their units with stories of victories. Of course, success then bred more success as soldiers tried to outperform each other. After a period of time, the forward troops began to acquire an individual feeling of superiority and, as Slim stated, "that first essential in the fighting man--the desire to close with his enemy."<sup>22</sup> The attitude began with a few individual soldiers, grew with various units, and then engulfed the Fourteenth Army. At this point, Slim had "laid the first of our intellectual foundations of morale: everyone knew we could defeat the Japanese, our object was attainable."<sup>23</sup>



In early 1944 the Japanese launched an offensive in the Arakan aimed at securing Burma from invasion by the British. The Japanese hoped that the destruction of Allied forces on the India-Burma border would cause a revolt in India, a revolt that the so-called Indian National Army could exploit.<sup>24</sup> However, during this stage of the war the Fourteenth Army was resupplied and had the numerical advantage of men, material, and resources. Furthermore, the British, under Slim's guidance, had changed operational methods. The British created strongholds into which troops would withdraw and be maintained by air resupply until the reserves were brought forward to envelop the Japanese. The Japanese would then be destroyed between the reserves and the stronghold.<sup>25</sup> Within three weeks, the British decisively defeated the Japanese in the Arakan and, in the counteroffensive, drove the Japanese from their North Arakan strongholds. The Fourteenth Army then went on to dislodge the Japanese at Imphal and Kohima. After two months of hard fighting the Japanese were driven back. By March 1945, Mandalay was in British control.

On 1 April 1945, the Fourteenth Army began to drive toward Rangoon. Although some opposition came from remnants of two Japanese armies, the major problem for the Fourteenth Army was to occupy Rangoon before the monsoon season started. In early May 1945, the Fourteenth Army linked up with an amphibious force that had landed unopposed in Rangoon two days earlier.

General Slim had accomplished the recapture of Burma. He had done so by understanding the psychology of his soldiers, mental flexibility, and the ability to properly direct his energy. Slim had the lowest priority for reinforcements and resupply of any major theater in the war. In the early days of the war, he had setbacks which might have caused other commanders to accept defeat. However, General Slim retained his determination, and communicated his intent and resolve to his soldiers. Because of their training and confidence, his men embodied the unofficial Fourteenth Army motto, 'the difficult is what you do today, the impossible takes a little longer.' Perhaps General Slim's determination was acknowledged when Lord Mountbatten stated, "Personally, I consider Slim was the finest general the Second World War produced."<sup>26</sup>

#### Evaluation of General Slim as a determined commander

Norman Dixon, writing in On the Psychology of Military Incompetence, states, "It is no exaggeration that he [Slim] has had...traits without which the outcome of the Burma Campaign might have been different."<sup>27</sup> In essence, another man might have made some of General Slim's decisions, but they would not have had the same effect. A close examination of General Slim's leadership, personality, courage and intellect provides a better understanding of the determined commander.

An officer's style of leadership is an intensely personal matter. General Slim, in a 1949 address to the U.S. Army Armor School, claimed, "Leadership is a mixture of example, persuasion, and compulsion...leadership is just plain you."<sup>28</sup> The method of leadership used by General Slim clearly indicates that he did not dominate his staff or subordinates, but guided them in pursuit of a common goal.

As a defeated commander, General Slim marshaled available Allied forces in India and reconstituted them into a fighting unit. During a period of personal introspection, he realized that his previous methods of conducting a campaign were inadequate. In order to be victorious, he realized he had to change the attitude and operational style of his entire army without changing the original objective of a total defeat of the Japanese Army.

General Slim's leadership style was personal and direct. He preferred to deal with people rather than things or assets. His personal leadership philosophy was, "the basis of all your knowledge has got to be a knowledge of man, because men are the most important weapon in war."<sup>29</sup> He was a compassionate military leader who could comprehend a soldier's situation but was nevertheless intolerant of mediocrity for any reason. He could identify with his soldiers but he did not give them sympathy. Slim once commented that the defeated British soldiers coming out of Burma were much too much being sorry for themselves.<sup>30</sup> Slim generally appealed to his soldiers in person and made

requests or orders by word of mouth. Through his direct leadership, he outlined organizational purpose and established unit standards.

Perhaps the most poignant example of General Slim's leadership style was his methods in planning and executing an operation. General Slim would first study the feasibility of the operation without any staff input. Next, he would discuss his concepts with the Major General Administration, Brigadier General Staff (B.G.S.), and his Air Force component commander to arrive at three or four broad outlines of possible courses of action. The B.G.S. would pass the courses of action to a team of planners, who could make new suggestions, devise permutations, or incorporate combinations of the original courses of action. The staff planners' proposals would be read by General Slim, who would then discuss each recommendation with the intelligence officer to determine likely enemy's reactions. The next step required a meeting of the principal staff officers. General Slim would present the plan, answer questions, and dispatch the staff officers to complete their portion of the plan. Throughout the war General Slim never personally wrote a complete operations order. However, Slim states that he always wrote one paragraph on all operational orders:

One part of the order I did, however, draft myself -- the intention. It is usually the shortest of all paragraphs, but it is always the most important, because it states -- or it should -- just what the commander intends to achieve. It is the one overriding expression of will.<sup>31</sup>

Once the operations order was completed and given to lower level commanders, General Slim's operational style of leadership was to insure subordinates had a firm understanding of his intent. In his absence, General Slim expected that subordinate commanders could execute his will without further instructions.

General Slim frequently commented, "leadership is a projection of your personality."<sup>32</sup> Obviously, intertwined in General Slim's leadership style was his personality. An officer working for General Slim claimed, "He inspired us by his simplicity, his own rugged down to earth approach to men and events, his complete naturalness and his absolutely genuine humor."<sup>33</sup> His stout appearance and protruding chin gave a false impression of ruthlessness. Although efficient and strict, General Slim was popular and respected. He had the unshakable self-confidence of most great leaders.<sup>34</sup> Once a course of action had been established, Slim would carry it through whatever the difficulties; he sincerely believed in the Fourteenth Army motto, "God helps those who help themselves."

Another aspect of General Slim's personality that made him unique was his courage to accept responsibility. Writing about a tactical error he committed during the Sudan-Abyssinia border operation in 1940, Slim commented, "I could find plenty of excuses for failure, but only one reason--myself. When two courses of action were open to me, I had not chosen, as a good commander should, the bolder."<sup>35</sup>

Obviously, in this example, not only did General Slim accept responsibility for failure, but he also tried to insure other men were not blamed for his errors.

Finally, to comprehend the operational commander's will, the commander's intellect must be scrutinized. General Slim was an intelligent commander. He had the ability to analyze the deficiencies in his unit, to learn from his mistakes, and to take corrective action. General Slim understood that experience without reflection was of little value. Reflecting on his failure in Burma, General Slim was able to work out a chain of cause and effect which led him to the conclusion that he would not be victorious unless he made significant alterations in his operations. General Slim had the imagination, flexibility of mind, and judgment to cease imitating failure and construct new methods of defeating the Japanese. General Slim's mental flexibility, imagination, and judgment during this critical period are the major reasons the British ultimately proved successful in recapturing Burma.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

The quality of mind most worthy seeking is not the power of will but; as said by Marcus Aurelius, 'Freedom of will and undeviating steadiness of purpose.'<sup>1</sup>

General Haig was an obstinate commander; he was a man of character not capable of changing his mind. General Haig had been the Commander-in-Chief of British Forces in France since December 1915. From his assumption of command until the Third Battle of Ypres, General Haig was the British commander responsible for the butchery of the Battle of the Somme and the heavy British casualties during the Battle of Arras. The Third Battle of Ypres, Passchendaele, was an unnecessary wholesale slaughter of British soldiers for an unattainable strategic objective.<sup>2</sup> Against all advice, Haig continued the attack. General Haig had the optimistic view that the Ypres offensive would be the climactic battle to defeat the German nation. The British did capture Passchendaele Ridge; however, General Haig was wrong in his assessment of the climactic battle. Passchendaele produced 400,000 British casualties and a salient in the British lines that the English surrendered to the Germans one year later without a fight. Ultimately, General Haig's will prevailed, albeit at unreasonable cost.

General Slim was a determined commander; he was a man of character capable of changing his mind. In 1942 General Slim was sent to Burma to command the I Corps. He found the British in a desperate military situation which resulted in a 1,000-mile retreat to Imphal, India. Slim's unit had been

tactically and operationally inferior to the Japanese; his troops' morale was broken, and the Burma theater was low on the Allies' list of resupply priorities. As a defeated commander, General Slim marshaled available Allied forces in India and reconstituted them into a fighting unit. After a period of personal introspection, General Slim realized that his previous methods of conducting a campaign were inadequate. In order to be victorious, General Slim recognized that he had to change the attitude and operational style of his entire army without changing the original objective of a total defeat of the Japanese Army. In early 1944 the Fourteenth Army under Slim's leadership drove the Japanese from the Arakan. The Fourteenth Army continued their success by dislodging the Japanese at Imphal and Kohima. By March 1945, Mandalay was under British control. Following the clear-cut victories in Central Burma, the Fourteenth Army pushed to Rangoon. In mid-May 1945, Rangoon was captured.

Both General Haig and General Slim were men of character. Character evaluated against the factors of leadership, personality, courage, and intelligence gives an indication to whether a commander will be obstinate or determined. The four factors used to evaluate obstinacy or determination must be considered in combination with one another to gain a true understanding of the operational commander's will.



An examination of the factors used to indicate whether a commander's will is obstinate or determined reveals that General Haig was a dominant leader who sincerely believed that he "was the chosen instrument of a Higher Power."<sup>3</sup> He did not, however, have the compassion necessary to understand the problems of his soldiers, nor did he care about others' opinions of him. Surprisingly, he was very popular. General Haig did not blame others for his personal shortcomings, which indicates a high degree of courage. His intellectual ability appears to be his greatest inadequacy. He found it extremely difficult to accept information that did not agree with his value system. His lack of mental flexibility was coupled with a very weak imagination. It is natural for men who do not come by ideas easily to cling to the ideas they already possess. Proportionately, it becomes even more difficult for a man with a weak imagination to acquire new ideas or to correct old ones.<sup>4</sup>

General Haig was an obstinate commander because he could not accept change or adapt to changing situations. He was a relatively prejudiced and authoritarian person whose interest in the welfare of others was very low. General Haig's belief that he was the chosen "Messiah" to lead the British Army prevented the acceptance of advice from subordinates. General Haig was an unimaginative, narrow-minded commander whose low self-esteem prevented him from admitting a mistake. Such inflexibility was General Haig's major problem.

An examination of the factors used to indicate whether a commander's will is obstinate or determined reveals that General Slim was a leader who did not dominate his subordinates, but merely guided them in pursuit of a common goal. He was a compassionate military leader who could understand a soldier's situation but was intolerant of mediocrity. His leadership style was personal and direct. Without question, General Slim influenced soldiers by his strong personality. General Slim claimed, "leadership is the projection of your personality."<sup>5</sup> General Slim had a genuine like for people and he was very popular. In addition, he had an unshakable self confidence and down-to-earth, common sense approach to solving problems. Another aspect of General Slim's personality was his courage to accept responsibility for failure. It is remarkable to have a defeated general write, "I could find plenty of excuses for failure, but only one reason - myself."<sup>6</sup> Not only did General Slim accept responsibility for failure, but he tried to insure other men did not receive blame for his errors. General Slim was an intelligent commander who had the ability to analyze the deficiencies in his unit, to learn from his mistakes, and to take corrective actions. As a defeated commander, General Slim was able to reflect on the reasons for failure. He realized that his previous methods of conducting a campaign were inadequate. General Slim's judgment and mental flexibility are the major reasons the British proved successful in recapturing Burma.

General Slim was a determined commander because he could readily accept change and adapt to changing situations. He generally accepted sound advice from his subordinate commanders and members of his staff. Probably his greatest attribute was the fact that he could admit mistakes, reflect on his reasons for failure, and take corrective action.

The study of the operational commander's will has shown the U.S. Army needs senior-level leaders who not only have a strong will but who also possess determination and not mere obstinacy. Most senior-level army officers have demonstrated at some point in their careers that they possess the quality of character, the ability to maintain constant and stable views regardless of external pressures. Without character, a senior-level military leader cannot be an effective operational commander; however, strength of character without reflective thought can degenerate into obstinacy. The operational commander must distinguish between obstinacy and tenacious determination. One of the major attributes of the determined commander is flexibility of mind, the ability to shift mental gears under pressure without confusion of purpose. A determined operational commander must change his mind when necessary; he must be cognizant of a delicate balance between strength of will and flexibility of mind.

If a senior-level leader does not have character, no training system can instill into the individual the personal

qualities of leadership, personality, courage, intelligence, and mental flexibility. At best, the U.S. Army can reveal and foster the development of these qualities as may be latent to some degree in a potential commander. These qualities may be developed only through continued use and experience. Leadership positions with soldiers or instructor positions in service schools are examples of assignments that may be of benefit in developing men of character into determined operational commanders.

## ENDNOTES

### Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

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<sup>2</sup> Mitchell M. Zais, "Strategic Vision and Strength of Will: Imperatives for the Theater Command," Parameters, Winter 1985, p. 59.

<sup>3</sup> Archibald Wavell, Generals and Generalship: The Lee Knowles Lectures Delivered at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1939, reprinted with other works for The Art of War Colloquium, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA., February 1983, p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> Field Manual 22-999, Leadership and Command at Senior Levels (Draft) Fort Leavenworth, KS.: p. 2-1.

<sup>5</sup> L. A. Pennington, Romeyn B. Hough, and W. H. Case, The Psychology of Military Leadership (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1943), p. 275.

<sup>6</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, On War, ed. and trans. by M. Howard and P. Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 105.

<sup>7</sup> Conrad Lanza, Napoleon and Modern War: His Military Maxims, Rev. and annotated by Conrad Lanza (Harrisburg, PA: Military Service Publishing Co., 1943), p. 96.

<sup>8</sup> W.J. Wood, Leaders and Battles: The Art of Military Leadership (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1984), p. 87.

<sup>9</sup> Clausewitz, p. 109.

<sup>10</sup> Emory S. Bogardus, Leaders and Leadership, Quoting Paul Pigors (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1934), p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>12</sup> Longman Dictionary of Psychology and Psychiatry, ed. by Robert Goldenson (New York: Longman, 1984), p. 547.

<sup>13</sup> Anthony Kellest, Combat Motivation: The Behavior of Soldiers in Battle (Boston: Kluwer-Nijhoff Publishing, 1982), p. 300.

<sup>14</sup> Clausewitz, p. 101.

<sup>15</sup> Wood, p. 149.

<sup>16</sup> Wood, p. 176.

## Chapter II: AN OBSTINATE COMMANDER

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<sup>2</sup> Bernard Montgomery, A History of Warfare, Quoting Ferdinand Foch (New York: World Publishing Co., 1968), p. 472.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 472.

<sup>4</sup> Herwig and Heyman, Biographical Dictionary of World War I (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1982), p. 177.

<sup>5</sup> John Keegan and Andrew Wheatcroft, Who's Who in Military History: From 1453 to the Present (New York: William Morrow Company, 1976), p. 152.

<sup>6</sup> Duff Cooper, Haig (London: Faber and Faber, n.d.), p. 134.

<sup>7</sup> Norman Dixon, On the Psychology of Military Incompetence (New York: Basic Books, 1976), p. 372.

• Peter Young, The Marshal Cavendish Illustrated Encyclopedia of World War I, Vol. 7 (New York: Marshall Cavendish, 1984), p. 2289.

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10 Cooper, p. 123.

11 Dixon, p. 381.

12 Dixon, p. 382.

13 Dixon, p. 382.

14 Young, vol. 7, p. 2285.

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16 Cooper, p. 123.

17 Dixon, p. 380.

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21 A. J. P. Taylor, The First World War (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 192.

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23 John Smyth, Leadership in Battle 1914-1918: Commanders in Action (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1975), p. 135.

<sup>24</sup> George Authur, Lord Haig (London: William Heinemann, 1928), p. 77.

<sup>25</sup> J. Charteris, Haig (New York: MacMillian Company, 1933), p. 89.

<sup>26</sup> Arthur, p. 46.

<sup>27</sup> Dixon, p. 379.

<sup>28</sup> Dixon p. 242.

<sup>29</sup> B.H. Liddell-Hart, Reputations: Ten Years After (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1928), p. 148.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

### Chapter III: A DETERMINED COMMANDER

<sup>1</sup> Clausewitz, pp. 104-5.

<sup>2</sup> Roy McKelvic, The War in Burma (London: Methuen and Co., 1948), p. viii.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 285.

<sup>4</sup> William Slim, Defeat Into Victory (London: Cassell and Company Ltd, 1956), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Parrish, The Simon and Schuster Encyclopedia of World War II (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), p. 574.

<sup>6</sup> McKelvie, p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Louis Allen, Burma: The Longest War 1941-45 (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1984), p. 61.



- 8 Slim, p. 119.
- 9 Desmond Flower and James Reeves, The Taste of Courage: The War 1939-1945 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), p. 332.
- 10 Kellett, p. 261.
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- 13 Slim, p. 121.
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<sup>26</sup> Dixon, p. 341. Quoting Lord Mountbatten.

<sup>27</sup> Dixon, p. 342.

<sup>28</sup> William Slim, Lecture on Leadership presented at the U.S. Armor School, Fort Knox, KY., in 1949.

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<sup>31</sup> Slim, Defeat Into Victory, pp. 210-211.

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<sup>33</sup> G. Evans, Slim (London: Bastford, 1969), p. 214.

<sup>34</sup> Dixon, p. 241.

<sup>35</sup> Evans, p. 43.

#### Chapter IV: CONCLUSIONS

<sup>1</sup> Marshall, p. 174.

<sup>2</sup> Keegan and Wheatcroft, p. 152.

<sup>3</sup> Charteris, p. 89.

<sup>4</sup> Fair, pp. 253-54.

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