

## IN DEFENCE OF “TOMMY” BURNS

by Second Lieutenant Will Lofgren

Lieutenant-General E.L.M. Burns has, for the most part, been pilloried in the annals of Canadian military history as an officer simply incapable of commanding a higher formation. This school of thought has developed because historians have been unwilling, or perhaps simply unable, to examine Burns’s actions on the battlefield. Without question, Burns was a successful corps commander; he led the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Corps to two major victories and no defeats during his time as commander. Nevertheless, the historiography surrounding Burns tends to focus on the interpersonal problems associated with his style of command – specifically, his difficult personality and his inability to win friends amongst his superiors or subordinates. This has happened because much of the work done on Burns since the Second World War has relied heavily on the opinions of his colleagues from the Italian campaign, instead of working from the unit war diaries and the after-action reports. By going through these documents, a very different picture of Burns’s command begins to emerge.

There is very little written overall about Burns’s time as a corps commander. His career did merit a chapter in J.L. Granatstein’s *The Generals: The Canadian Army’s Senior Commanders in the Second World War*, as well as in Bernd Horn’s and Stephen Harris’s *Warrior Chiefs*. Both of these works, however, do not make much mention of Burns’s accomplishments as a corps commander. They focus instead on his personality and his career as a military theorist, leaving the impression that he simply was not suitable for higher command positions. The recent article in the *Canadian Military Journal* (vol. 7, No. 1, Spring 2006) by Major J.P. Johnston, “E.L.M. Burns – A Crisis of Command,” is in the same vein as the chapters in *The Generals* and *Warrior Chiefs*. It praises Burns’s intellect, while attacking his ability to command. Furthermore, the article relied almost exclusively on secondary sources, with the evidentiary emphasis being placed on the Granatstein and Horn/Harris works. By basing the majority of his research on secondary sources, Major Johnston had little choice but to conclude: “[Burns] was not the charismatic leader who could imbue confidence and faith.”<sup>1</sup> This, however, is not the whole story.

Burns had a difficult personality. This fact cannot be denied, and it should not be ignored. Many of the reasons why Burns eventually was fired stemmed from his personality and how he interacted with other strong and

challenging personalities in his chain of command. The former 8<sup>th</sup> Army commander, General Sir Oliver Leese, had been critical of Burns, and he had initiated a Canadian investigation into Burns’s fitness of command in July 1944. General Sir Richard McCreery, Leese’s replacement as 8<sup>th</sup> Army commander, was equally dissatisfied with Burns, stating “his manner is depressing, diffident and unenthusiastic, and he must completely fail to inspire his subordinate commanders.”<sup>2</sup> This may have been true, but it should not have been enough to have Burns sacked – particularly in view of his winning record as a commander. Noted Canadian military historian J.L. Granatstein writes: “Some senior Canadian officers had been complaining behind Burns’s back to the Eighth Army headquarters.”<sup>3</sup> Major-General George Kitching, who entered the Italian theatre as Burns was in the process of leaving, substantiates this with the statement: “Someone on our staff had been disloyal to General Burns when he commanded the Corps and had been inclined to involve the Army Chief of Staff and the Army Commander in [purely Canadian matters].”<sup>4</sup> With this lack of support from his subordinates, notably Major-General Chris Vokes, Burns had to be relieved of command. Obviously, Burns’s inability to inspire loyalty in his subordinates is a deficiency in his ability to command. Nevertheless, had Vokes not campaigned for Burns’s dismissal,<sup>5</sup> it is difficult to imagine why Burns would have been fired. In the end, Vokes simply complained loudly enough, and to enough people. Thus, Burns, although successful on the battlefield, could not survive the storm created by Chris Vokes.

Looking back on his tenure as commander of 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Corps, Burns could be well pleased with his accomplishments. He later wrote:

During my period of command, the Corps had taken all objectives assigned to it, inflicting heavy losses on the enemy, which comprised the best divisions in Italy. Though progress was not always as rapid as desirable, nevertheless, during our period of action, we went farther and faster than any other corps.<sup>6</sup>

This is true. Under Burns, the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Corps had been perhaps the most effective corps within the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, and perhaps within the entire 15<sup>th</sup> Army Group. The Canadians, under Burns, had led the way during the battle for the Gothic Line and the pursuit that followed

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that battle. Colonel (ret'd) G.W.L. Nicholson, the official historian of the Canadians during the Italian campaign, states that Burns could, "...look back on a satisfying record of achievement by the Canadian formations under his command."<sup>7</sup> Despite his problems of personality, Burns had won two major victories with the corps.

However, the Liri Valley battles did not constitute Burns's greatest period as a corps commander. But he was fighting with a brand new headquarters and a brand new armoured division, and many of the problems that plagued the corps during these battles were not directly attributable to him. For the most part, these problems can be placed on the shoulders of Burns's superior, Leese, or upon his subordinate staff officers. Leese quite simply botched the operation and single-handedly slowed down the pursuit phase of the battle. This occurred specifically when Leese attempted to stuff units from the British 13<sup>th</sup> Corps through Burns's sector. Switching boundaries and re-allocating routes during heavy fighting are actions bound to cause serious problems in terms of communication and speed of movement. While a more experienced corps commander might have recognized these problems before they happened, and then argued against such an action, realistically, Burns could only react to Leese's decisions. Burns's subordinates, particularly his Brigadier General Staff, Nick McCarter, were even further 'behind the power curve,' and did not anticipate upcoming difficulties. However, this was Burns's first battle fought with his headquarters, and battle was far more difficult than training. Regardless, Burns and the Canadians took all their objectives during the Liri Valley operations. It was not a perfect battle, and the corps did not exploit as far or as fast as was expected, but it was nonetheless a success.

Following Liri, Burns could have rested on the fact that his corps had achieved all of its objectives. However, his fading job security, coupled with the knowledge that certain aspects of the battle had been problematic, kept him engaged. This period of time following the Liri Valley operations was essential to Burns's later successes, but it also demonstrates his innate ability to plan and prepare for the next battle. In some ways, this qualifies Burns as the excellent staff officer that Granatstein, Horn, and Wyczynski have all acknowledged. Furthermore, as a commander, this period demonstrates that Burns was able to analyze the failings within himself and his corps, and to correct them for the next battle. It is impossible to say whether these corrections won the battle of the Gothic Line for Burns. However, they did serve to eliminate the problems that had drastically slowed down the pursuit phase of the Liri Valley operations.

During the battle for the Gothic Line and the subsequent pursuit to Rimini, Burns again led the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Corps to victory. This battle, perhaps the pinnacle of his career, saw Burns's corps leading the entire 8<sup>th</sup> Army charge towards Rimini. The Canadians broke the Gothic Line – plain and simple. In the wake of that accomplishment, Burns took command of two more divisions and then spearheaded the 8<sup>th</sup> Army push on Rimini. Without question, Burns and his corps did the best job of any of the 8<sup>th</sup> Army formations during this particular battle. The problems that had plagued Burns in the victory at Liri were not even a factor during this operation. More than at any other time, Burns proved himself a capable corps commander in combat.

Throughout his time in command, Burns had to deal with the fact that he simply did not fit into the 8<sup>th</sup> Army clique of senior officers. His subordinates, Generals Vokes and Hoffmeister, had been fighting in that numbered army since Sicily. They were accustomed to its commanders and were as much a "part of the club" as any Canadian officers could be. Burns was a newcomer, with a corps headquarters that no one at the higher command levels particularly wanted, and therefore, he was not easily accepted. Other personalities might still have found a way to make themselves acceptable to Leese, McCreery, or even Vokes and Hoffmeister. Burns simply could not. This is the primary reason that he lost his command, but his people skills should not overshadow his achievements as a corps commander.

Following his dismissal from command, Burns assumed the role of General-Officer-in-Charge Canadian Section, General Headquarters, 2<sup>nd</sup> Echelon, 21 Army Group. In effect, Burns was to be responsible for Canadian rear area units. He held this position, at the rank of major-general, until the end of the war. The 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Corps continued to struggle onward after Burns's dismissal. It came into the line in Italy for the last time in December 1944. During this month, the corps was successful in liberating "145 square miles of Italian territory, including the city of Ravenna, four other towns and thirty villages."<sup>8</sup> While these gains were very significant, the Italian campaign was slowly grinding to an end. The corps would re-deploy to Northwest Europe within four months of Burns's departure. Like their previously departed commander, the soldiers of 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Corps would finish the war away from the theatre where they had done their most exceptional work.

Lieutenant-General E.L.M. Burns was the most successful Canadian corps commander in Italy, and one of the most successful Canadian corps commanders in the entire Second World War. While in command,

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he won two major offensives. Thanks in no small part to a formidable intellect, Burns continued to improve as a commander throughout his eight-month tenure as corps commander. While his first battle left something to be desired, his second battle, the Battle for the Gothic Line, was a resounding victory that should have guaranteed him a more distinguished place in Canadian military history. Still, historians have become 'hung up' on the fact that Burns was not an archetypal leader, in terms of leadership style and

interpersonal skills. This reality cannot be denied, but its importance can certainly be called into question – especially when Burns's results obtained on the battlefield are examined with the same scrutiny as his relationships with his peers.

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Second Lieutenant Lofgren, a Royal Military College of Canada Honours graduate in History and an armoured officer, is currently undergoing advanced phase training at Canadian Forces Base Gagetown.

## NOTES

1. J.P. Johnston, "E.L.M. Burns – A Crisis of Command," in *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Spring 2006.
2. J.L. Granatstein, *The Generals: The Canadian Army's Senior Commanders in the Second World War*. (Toronto: Stoddart, 1993), p. 141.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
4. George Kitching, *Mud and Green Fields: The Memoirs of George Kitching*. (Langley, British Columbia: Battleline Books, 1987), p. 238.
5. Granatstein, p. 142.
6. E.L.M. Burns, *General Mud: Memoirs of Two World Wars*. (Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1970), p. 219.
7. G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy*. (Ottawa: The Queen's Printer, 1966), p. 606.
8. Burns, p. 223.



DND photo – CFPU ZK704

General H.D.G. Crerar (left) and Lieutenant-General E.L.M. Burns in Italy, 1944.