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Military Cooperation within the Commonwealth  
1939-1945

1. This report consists primarily of a paper on "Military Cooperation within the Commonwealth, 1939-1945" which was read by the present writer at the Midwest Conference on British Historical Studies held at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, on 3-4 November 1956.
2. A copy of the paper, slightly altered since it was read, appears as Appendix "A" to this report. The paper is fully documented.
3. Since this paper was being read publicly and in a foreign country, it was necessary to limit the information contained in it to matters already in print. In general, also, the content was limited to matters dealt with in official histories. Many points which would have been relevant had to be excluded in these circumstances. For example, the relationship of the United Kingdom authorities to General McNaughton's resignation of the command of First Canadian Army is not referred to, and in general the issues which arose during the North-West Europe campaign (which is not yet covered in published official histories) are not dealt with. These issues were not particularly numerous or important, but it may be in order to recall here General Crerar's difficulties with Lieut.-General Sir John Crocker, G.O.C. 1 Brit Corps, late in July 1944, and with Lord Montgomery in connection with an incident at Dieppe early in September of the same year. These matters will be dealt with in due course in Volume III of the Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War.
4. It was pointed out during the discussion at Ann Arbor that the paper had not dealt with the difficulties between British and Australian authorities during the campaign in Malaya in 1942, which ended with the fall of Singapore. This controversial matter is not covered in the volumes of the British and Australian official histories now available.
5. It may be noted that the present report owes a considerable debt to A.H.Q. Report No. 48, dated 5 Mar 52 ("Canada and the Higher Direction of the Second World War"). Passages from that report have been carried over into the present one.
6. In connection with the preparation of this paper, Capt. L.R. Cameron carried out research on the Visiting Forces Acts passed in Dominions other than Canada, and the consideration of the Visiting



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Forces (British Commonwealth) Act by the Parliament of Canada in March 1933. The paper written by him is attached to this report as Appendix "B".

7. There are no plans, so far as the present writer is aware, to publish the proceedings of the conference at Ann Arbor. The present report is prepared because it is considered that the papers at Appendices "A" and "B" will be useful when the time comes to compile the projected volume on Canadian Military Policy in the Second World War.

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20 Nov 1956.



MILITARY COOPERATION WITHIN THE COMMONWEALTH

1939-1945

I

The history of the British Commonwealth of Nations during the Second World War has so far received rather less attention than it merits. In the public eye, and also in the eyes of historians, who are sometimes more strongly influenced by current popular opinion than they wholly care to admit, the topic has been dwarfed by the problems of cooperation between the Commonwealth and the United States and between the Western Allies and Russia. People who have read with avidity works telling how Mr. Churchill got on with Mr. Roosevelt, or how both of them failed to get on with Marshal Stalin, have been less interested in Churchill's dealings with General Smuts or Mr. John Curtin or Mr. Mackenzie King, or in the questions that arose between the military commanders of the different Commonwealth forces.

For this there are probably good reasons. The relations between the three great Allied powers were more important and certainly much more dramatic than those between the countries of the Commonwealth. The absence of drama is due to the natural and happy fact that the conflicts of opinion within the Commonwealth were less violent than those between the major powers. The fact is -- and it is as well to state it clearly in the beginning -- that the countries of the Commonwealth, on balance, managed to get along pretty well together and to cooperate effectively in prosecuting a war in which the interests of all of them were very much at stake. This is not to say that there were no serious difficulties, and indeed it is with those difficulties that this paper must largely be concerned; but it is important that they should not be allowed to obscure the generally satisfactory nature of the relationship.

Another reason for the relative lack of interest in the subject has probably been the fact that until recently there has been a shortage of information about it. The Commonwealth countries and their political leaders have not gone into print, either official or private, with the rapidity and frankness that have become common form in the United States. To this generalization, it is true, there has been one monumental exception. Sir Winston Churchill's extraordinary work is enormously valuable; but it is subject to the obvious and inevitable limitations of a personal record. Sir Winston could not deal fully with everything. He therefore dealt, presumably, with the questions that interested him most; and the light which his book throws upon the wartime history of the Commonwealth is somewhat fitful. Certain corners have been brightly, even luridly illuminated; others have remained dark.



Fortunately for the historian who wishes to study these matters, the past few years have witnessed some improvement in the situation. All the major countries of the Commonwealth have begun publishing official histories, with the result that today the student has available a considerably larger body of facts than before. These histories are the main basis of this paper. I cannot claim to have read everything that has been published, and much still remains unpublished.\* What I am laying before you today, then, is merely a sort of preliminary report. With the faint hope of disarming criticism, I begin by apologizing for its inadequacies.

## II

A basic problem presented itself in the relations between the Commonwealth countries in the Second World War, -- one which invariably presents itself in wartime coalitions between countries of different scales of power. It is the problem of the competing claims of military efficiency and national sovereignty. To it there is probably no final solution. It is especially difficult for what are sometimes called the "middle powers", a category to which most of the Dominions may be said to belong. A great power, simply because it is in a position to make a very large military contribution, will have little difficulty in making its voice heard. A small country will make a small contribution, if any, and probably will not expect to exert much influence. But a country of medium status, which makes a contribution to victory materially less than those of the great powers, but large enough to be valuable and to represent a heavy sacrifice on its own part, is in an awkward position. In certain circumstances it may feel with some resentment that it is pouring out blood and treasure in accordance with plans which it had no share in making and over which it has little or no control.

This problem is not one which can safely be considered in a narrow spirit. It is generally agreed that military efficiency requires the largest possible concentration of power in the fewest possible hands. Since the days of Ancient Rome, nations in time of war have found it necessary to allow their own leaders much larger domestic powers than are accorded them in peace.

In seasons of great peril  
'Tis good that one bear sway;  
Then choose we a Dictator  
Whom all men shall obey.

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\*I say little about South Africa. The reason is that only one volume of that country's history has been published (J.A.I. Agar-Hamilton and L.C.F. Turner, Crisis in the Desert, May-July 1942, Oxford, 1952) and it is almost entirely tactical. Similarly, the United Kingdom has published only one policy volume (John Ehrman, Grand Strategy, V) although there are several dealing with operations.



Similarly, it usually seems necessary to make sacrifices of national sovereignty when war is being waged by a coalition. These sacrifices are painful; but they are less painful than being defeated. The directing authority of a coalition will normally be some sort of committee; and the larger the committee, and the more numerous the interests it has to reconcile within itself, the less effective its leadership is likely to be. It would be poor economy to seek to safeguard national sovereignty at the cost of a sacrifice of military efficiency which may lead to national sovereignty being extinguished totally and permanently by the enemy.

On the other hand, the fact must be faced that the great powers who are the dominant members of a coalition may sometimes make decisions in accordance with the dictates of their own interests rather than those of the group as a whole; they will not take particular account of the interests of their junior partners as elements in the situation; they may not even take time to consider what those interests are. They may use the argument of military efficiency merely as a method of keeping authority in their own hands, which is of course much more convenient for them. In these circumstances, the position of a "middle power" is bound to be uncomfortable, and its policy is almost certain to be a succession of compromises. It must be prepared to make large concessions to the leadership of the great powers who are fighting on its side; but it must also raise its voice to assert its own interests and must seek to force its associates to take account of those interests. Nevertheless, it can only do this to the extent that it can be done without injury to the common cause. Broadly speaking, I think it may be said that this was the line of policy pursued by the Government of Canada in 1939-45; and I think it was also, in greater or less degree, the line followed by the other Dominions.

The problem of efficiency versus sovereignty exists on all levels in time of war: on the low "tactical" level where units and formations from different countries are cooperating on the field of battle against the common enemy; and on the much higher levels where politics and grand strategy jostle each other and where the statesmen and the chiefs of staff conduct their complicated operations. In this paper I propose to try to consider the Commonwealth relationship at both these levels. I have no time or space to deal with questions that arose between Commonwealth countries and countries outside the Commonwealth; although it is very difficult to eliminate all consideration of these matters, especially when one is dealing with the topmost level of affairs. In particular, it is hard to say very much about strategy in the Second World War without mentioning the Anglo-American relationship as well as that between the countries of the Commonwealth.

### III

We cannot avoid some consideration of rather ancient history -- the history of the First World



War. It is unnecessary to recall to this audience the importance of that incident in the development of the Commonwealth. Indeed, the modern Commonwealth is a by-product of the First World War. The concept of the Dominions as independent states under the Crown resulted largely from their effort in that war. In 1914 they were "self-governing colonies"; but countries that produce formidable armies such as those which Australia and Canada ultimately placed in the field in 1914-18 cannot be treated as dependencies. This became increasingly obvious to the political and military authorities of the United Kingdom while the war was still in progress. In November 1917 Lord Derby wrote to Field-Marshal Haig from the War Office that he was having "a great deal of trouble" with "the Colonial Forces". "They look upon themselves", he wrote rather sadly, "not as part and parcel of the English Army but as Allies beside us."<sup>1</sup> This was a quite accurate statement of the situation as the Dominion forces saw it at that stage. They would not have considered themselves "part and parcel of the English Army" even if Derby had made the concession of calling it the British Army.

Perhaps I may be allowed to use the Canadian forces to illustrate a situation which was certainly general. As the war went on a Canadian national spirit was more and more evident within the Canadian Corps in France. It found reflection in the actions and policies of the Corps Commander, Sir Arthur Currie. It is true that, to the end, the Corps functioned as part of the British armies in France and was always under the operational command of a British Army Commander. No other situation would have been viable in a military sense. Nevertheless, during 1917-18 some growth of autonomy was evident even in operational matters; while "in matters of organization and administration, the Canadian Government... retained full responsibility in respect to its own Forces". In July 1918 a "Canadian Section" was formed at British G.H.Q. in France to deal with questions of Canadian administration.<sup>2</sup>

Combining these military developments with those on the political level, where the Imperial War Cabinet and the Imperial War Conferences are familiar to everybody, by the end of the war the position of the Dominions had undergone a revolution. The advances made were registered, after some natural time-lag, in the report of the Imperial Conference of 1926 and, still more formally, five years later, in the Statute of Westminster. The British Empire of 1914 had been transformed into the British Commonwealth of Nations, a community of states with established rights to independent foreign and military policies of their own. Thus the British world approached the Second World War in circumstances very different from those in which it had confronted the First. The new situation presented new military problems, and most of these remained to be resolved after the outbreak of the new war.

It is true that some attempt was made before war came to provide a basis for a new military relationship; but under the conditions of the thirties, particularly the unwillingness of the Dominions, and



especially Canada, to make any commitments to action in advance of a crisis, the attempt was necessarily halting. In 1932-33 the United Kingdom, Canada and South Africa all passed Visiting Forces Acts<sup>2</sup> which provided a basis for cooperation between the Commonwealth countries by prescribing a legal procedure by which one country's forces could be placed under a commander from another country when circumstances made this desirable. Australia and New Zealand did not pass legislation of this type until 1939\*, and even then it seems to have played little part in their military arrangements. Canada on the other hand used her Visiting Forces Act of 1933 as the legal basis of military cooperation within the Commonwealth throughout the war.

#### IV

It may be simplest to deal first with the lower levels -- the problems that arose in a theatre of operations when troops from more than one Commonwealth country were operating together. Here I propose to take my examples mainly from the experiences of New Zealand and Canada. These two countries approached their problems from somewhat different angles, and the problems themselves did not have a great deal in common. Incidentally, New Zealand is producing an exceptionally full and admirable history.

The uniquely distinguished officer\*\*whom the New Zealand Government appointed to command the New Zealand Expeditionary Force which was raised in 1939 immediately gave anxious consideration to the implications of the new situation created by the recent constitutional changes. He was painfully aware that he was going to be charged with a dual responsibility. He would be operationally responsible to the Commander-in-Chief of the theatre in which his force would serve (who would normally be a British officer); but at the same time he was responsible to the Government of New Zealand for the manner in which the force was employed. He discussed the question with New Zealand Ministers. In the event of such a misfortune as the loss of a brigade, he asked, to whom would he be responsible -- the British Commander-in-Chief under whom he was serving, or the New Zealand Government? He was told that account would have to be made to the government.

As a result, Freyberg drafted for himself a directive which was accepted by the Government of the United Kingdom and was duly signed by the Prime Minister of New Zealand. This "charter" began as follows:

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\*This is doubtless connected with the fact that these countries did not legislate to make the Statute of Westminster effective in connection with them until 1942 and 1947 respectively. See Mansergh, Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs: Problems of External Policy, 1931-1939, 17-19. On Visiting Forces Acts, see Appendix "B" of this report.

\*\*Major-General B.C. Freyberg, now Lieut.-General Lord Freyberg, V.C., G.C.M.G., K.C.B., K.B.E., D.S.O. (and 3 bars).



The General Officer Commanding will act in accordance with the instructions he receives from the Commander-in-Chief under whom he is serving, subject only to the requirements of His Majesty's Government in New Zealand. He will, in addition to powers appearing in any relevant Statute or Regulations, be vested with the following powers:

- (a) In the case of sufficiently grave emergency or in special circumstances, of which he must be the sole judge, to make decisions as to the employment of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force, and to communicate such decisions directly to the New Zealand Government, notwithstanding that in the absence of that extraordinary cause such communication would not be in accordance with the normal channels of communication....

Other portions of the directive, while instructing Freyberg to adhere to normal channels "in matters of command", authorized him to communicate direct with both the New Zealand Government and the Commander-in-Chief under whom he might be serving, and gave him full authority in matters of organization and training.<sup>4</sup>

These very wide powers are the more remarkable in that the New Zealand Expeditionary Force consisted in practice of just one division. The commander of this small formation was thus made in effect a subordinate commander-in-chief, who could, when he considered it important to do so, by-pass the commanders of the corps, the army and the theatre in which he was serving.

Freyberg's powers did not remain wholly in abeyance. During the campaign in North Africa he repeatedly acted in a somewhat independent manner, though usually in relatively minor matters concerning organization, etc.<sup>5</sup> He never refused to obey an order relating to operations nor otherwise embarrassed at a crisis the commanders under whom he was serving. The independent line he took must nevertheless have rather seriously irritated the local British command. However, although he commanded only one division it was a division of particular excellence, very valuable in operations. Reinforcing the political considerations, this no doubt influenced his military superiors to accept his attitude.

Freyberg and other New Zealand officers had a special problem. They had little confidence in the British military command in North Africa before the advent of Alexander and Montgomery, who, in the words of a New Zealand official historian, "gave Eighth Army the leadership it deserved".<sup>6</sup> At the end of the unsatisfactory Libyan campaign of 1941 Freyberg, he wrote afterwards, "became firmly convinced that the only



way to safeguard the interests of New Zealand and of the Division was to get the Division away from the Desert Command". He accordingly insisted upon its being transferred to Syria for rest and training. Before this was done orders were received that the Division was again to be used in the Desert. The New Zealand Government did not actually object; but it did send Freyberg a communication expressing disappointment "that circumstances now apparently require further operations by the New Zealand Division so soon after its recent heavy losses"; and he was instructed to show this cable to the Commander-in-Chief.<sup>7</sup> The latter was thus warned that Little Brother was watching him, and that there were considerations concerning the employment of New Zealand troops which did not apply to British divisions. It is not surprising that he now found it practicable to move the New Zealanders to Syria. It must be added that early in the following summer, when a further advance by Rommel caused a serious crisis in Cyrenaica, Freyberg made no difficulty whatever about returning to the battle area. He did this without taking time to refer the matter to his government.

Neither the apprehensions of the New Zealand Government nor Freyberg's lack of confidence in the commanders above him resulted in the New Zealanders not pulling their full weight in operations. In the summer of 1942 the New Zealand Division was practically cut to pieces in the fighting accompanying the withdrawal to the Alamein line and the first battles upon it. That campaign strengthened the New Zealand doubts as to the competence of the British command in the theatre.<sup>8</sup> What would have happened had this situation continued is a matter for speculation. Now, however, Mr. Churchill intervened and changed the command. A still higher authority immediately removed from the scene the general whom he designated to command the Eighth Army. A relatively unknown officer, Lieut.-General B.L. Montgomery, was brought out from the United Kingdom to succeed him. After Montgomery's arrival the New Zealanders never had reason to doubt the competence of the Desert Command.

The Canadian story is rather different. As already indicated, the legal basis of Canadian military cooperation was the Visiting Forces Acts. These acts provided for two types of relationship between Commonwealth forces: "serving together" and "in combination". In the former, as interpreted by the lawyers, the forces were virtually independent of each other though cooperating. In the latter, command was unified and the commander of one force was given correspondingly wide powers over the other. The change from one relationship to the other was effected by a formal order issued by a commander authorized to take such action.

The original directive given to General McNaughton when he took the 1st Canadian Division to England in December 1939 did not go into detail. His relationship to the British military authorities was merely defined as follows: "All matters concerning military operations and discipline in the Field, being



the direct responsibility of the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army in the theatre of operations, will be dealt with by the General Officer Commanding, Canadian Forces in the Field, through the Commander-in-Chief, whose powers in this regard are exercisable within the limitations laid down in the Visiting Forces Act....". It was further indicated that "training and administration of personnel" were matters to be dealt with through Canadian channels.<sup>9</sup> Apart from this, the relationship remained to be worked out in practice.

It is interesting that New Zealand, a country usually considered more British than the British, provided very definite safeguards in the beginning, while Canada, which had usually taken the lead in matters concerning Dominion autonomy, did not supply her commander with a "charter" like Freyberg's but left the matter to be worked out within the framework of the Visiting Forces Act. This is the more remarkable since General McNaughton, during the years between the wars, had given much thought to the position of a possible future Canadian expeditionary force, and had arrived at principles in general very similar to those laid down in Freyberg's directive. That more definite paper provisions were not made at this time may perhaps be interpreted as reflecting a Canadian tendency to pragmatism in such matters, an unwillingness to raise questions in theory before they arise in practice.

The first practical question that arose in England was training. A War Office instruction confided the training of the 1st Canadian Division to the commander of a British corps. It was then pointed out to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff that this conflicted with McNaughton's instructions and with the legal status of the Canadian forces in the United Kingdom. These forces were still "serving together" with the British, and were not to be placed "in combination" until they moved out of the United Kingdom or were otherwise required to engage in operations. The War Office now issued new orders recognizing that "training policy, discipline and internal administration of the Canadian Forces" were matters for Canadian authority. Nevertheless, the Canadians' training continued to be closely coordinated with that of the British formations alongside which they were to fight.<sup>10</sup>

As time passed, the independent status of the Canadian forces was more and more carefully defined by provisions set up under the Visiting Forces Act. When the 1st Canadian Division was preparing to move to the Continent to join the Second British Expeditionary Force after Dunkirk in June 1940, McNaughton issued an "order of detail" which placed his troops "in combination" with those of the United Kingdom "until I shall otherwise direct". He thus retained the theoretical right to withdraw them from combination.<sup>11</sup> Similar authority was given to the commander of the small Canadian force that was sent to Hong Kong in November 1941. He was instructed to place his troops "in combination" at the time of landing in the colony, and not to withdraw them "other than in circumstances that you judge to be of compelling necessity,



in which case you are to seek further instructions from Canada". He was authorized to communicate direct with his government; and he was told to "keep constantly in mind the fact that you are responsible to the Canadian Government for the Force under your command".<sup>12</sup>

When the raid on Dieppe was being planned in 1942, an interesting exchange took place between British and Canadian commanders in the United Kingdom. The original planning on the Army side was controlled by the Commander-in-Chief of the British South-Eastern Command (General Montgomery); but the raiding force was to be largely Canadian and was commanded by a Canadian general whose division was then serving in the 1st Canadian Corps under Montgomery's operational command. It came to light that Montgomery, along with Lord Louis Mountbatten and the air force commander, intended to "watch" and supervise the raid from an R.A.F. headquarters in England. No Canadian officer was to be present. General McNaughton, who was now commanding the First Canadian Army, suggested that this was inappropriate. The first British reaction to his comment was unsympathetic, and it was obvious that British commanders proposed to treat this operation as though the raiding division were one of their own formations. Lieut.-General H.D.G. Crerar, who was commanding the 1st Canadian Corps, then pointed out to Montgomery that Crerar's relationship to him did not relieve Crerar of responsibility to the Canadian Government through McNaughton. His memorandum of the conversation states, "In order to illustrate this point in a general way I suggested that the position of C.-in-C., Home Forces, in respect to Lieut.-General McNaughton and the Canadian Army in the U.K. was very similar to that occupied by Field Marshal Foch in relation to Field Marshal Haig and the B.E.F. in the last war." Montgomery subsequently invited both McNaughton and Crerar to join him on the day of the operation.<sup>13</sup>

Although the independent constitutional position of the Canadian fighting formations was thus fully protected, the Canadian Government and its commanders carefully refrained from any action that might interfere with exerting the strongest pressure on the enemy. The special powers authorizing Canadian commanders to appeal to their own government were never invoked in practice. The mere fact that these powers were known to exist may have operated to make this unnecessary. But we must also note that the Canadians never found themselves in the uncomfortable position the New Zealanders were in in North Africa, that of serving under a higher command which did not possess their full confidence. In the hard campaigns in Italy and North-West Europe the Canadian forces clearly felt, in general, that the British commanders above them thoroughly knew their business.

Under the conditions of close cooperation which necessarily exist in a theatre of operations, the selection of Canadian senior commanders was a suitable matter for consultation between the British and Canadian Governments. Thus when in the summer of 1944 the



British command in Italy raised the question of the possible desirability of replacing the commander of the 1st Canadian Corps, the Canadian military authorities in England discussed the question with the British and arranged in the first instance that he should remain for another phase of operations. Subsequently, after further discussion, he was replaced.<sup>14</sup> When General McNaughton gave up the command of the First Canadian Army late in 1943, his successor, General Crerar, was appointed by the Canadian Government after consultation with the British War Office -- a procedure which was particularly appropriate in that British formations were to be serving under General Crerar's command.<sup>15</sup> During the first phase of the North-West Europe campaign, in fact, the majority of the divisions serving in the First Canadian Army were British.

The care which was taken to protect the Canadian forces' independent legal status did nothing to hamper excellent practical cooperation between British and Canadian formations in the field. The 3rd Canadian Infantry Division landed on the Normandy D Day under the command of the 1st British Corps, and continued to serve under it for more than a month thereafter. When it passed to the command of the 2nd Canadian Corps the division recorded that it was sorry to leave the British Corps, "with whom we planned and carried out with success the initial stages of the Operation". When the 2nd Canadian Corps itself passed from the Second British Army to the First Canadian Army a fortnight or so later, the following entry was made in its General Staff diary: "While there is satisfaction in becoming part of First Cdn Army, there will be genuine regret in H.Q. 2 Cdn Corps at leaving Second Brit Army. 2 Cdn Corps' relations with Second Brit Army and other corps of that formation have been excellent, and while we learned much from them we found our ideas and methods of working already fitted theirs suprisingly well. Three somewhat complicated plans were made and carried out with a minimum of fuss and no serious hitches."<sup>16</sup>

## V

I turn now to cooperation on the levels of politics and grand strategy.

Consultation between the Commonwealth countries was easier in a physical sense in the Second World War than in the First. Air transport permitted Commonwealth statesmen to visit each other with rapidity and comparative comfort; while the radio telephone permitted trans-Atlantic communications more personal than those which can be carried out by cable. Considerable use was made of both methods.

However, the precedents of the First World War were not followed in the Second so far as constitutional machinery was concerned. Here the facts are probably familiar and need not detain us. Mr. Churchill and Mr. Mackenzie King agreed in the opinion that an Imperial War Cabinet was neither necessary nor



desirable; but their reasons were clearly rather different. The British Prime Minister, who was always rather readier to accept responsibility than to share it, felt that the permanent attendance of Commonwealth ministers would render the War Cabinet unwieldy; he probably felt also that it would create additional problems for him.\* The Canadian Prime Minister evidently felt that participation in an Imperial War Cabinet would be in some degree a threat to Canadian autonomy. In Sir Winston's phrase, Mr. King "deployed formidable constitutional arguments against Canada being committed by her representative to the decisions of a council in London".<sup>17</sup> He (King) told the Canadian House of Commons that, thanks to the new means of communication, there was in effect a "real but invisible imperial council" permanently in session.<sup>18</sup>

Australia, it will be recalled, took a different line, arguing for an Imperial War Cabinet. In the absence of support from either Britain or Canada, it failed to carry its point. All it achieved was the stationing in London of an Australian "Special Representative" (Sir Earle Page), who could attend the meetings of the British War Cabinet when matters of special Australian interest were discussed, and would have a general "right to be heard".<sup>19</sup>

General strategic consultation, then, was not carried on through a committee in London, but either through long-distance communication between the Commonwealth governments as need arose, or by personal discussion when a Dominion minister visited London or a British minister visited a Dominion. There were times when the British Government, upon which the burden of day-to-day conduct of the war inevitably mainly rested, acted first and told the Dominions about it afterwards. Sometimes this happened even in matters of direct Dominion concern. To cite one case, in 1942, when the Germans shackled the prisoners taken at Dieppe, the British War Cabinet decided to undertake reprisals. It did this without consultation with Canada, in spite of the fact that the German prisoners were chiefly in Canada and Canada would have to do the shackling. The Canadian Government disliked the absence of consultation and it also disagreed with the policy of reprisals. Nevertheless, it "went along with" the policy, simply because it was so important to avoid encouraging the enemy by having public differences with the United Kingdom.<sup>20</sup>

Apart from the question of whether the Dominion governments were or were not to be consulted on matters of grand strategy, there was the question of keeping them informed on current developments and future plans. Sir Winston Churchill has published in his memoirs more than one memorandum which he sent to the Secretary of State for the Dominions complaining that too much information was being given to Dominion governments about the progress of the war.<sup>21</sup> It is evident from these that he wished such dissemination of information to be distinctly limited, and preferred that all important information of this sort should be sent personally by himself on a Prime-Minister-to-Prime-Minister basis.

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\*Mr. Churchill's insistence that no Dominion Minister but a Prime Minister could be a member was really an insuperable bar to the creation of a permanent imperial War Cabinet.



When the United States entered the war the matter became more complicated. I cannot deal with this phase in any detail; but as you are all aware the grand strategy of the Western Allies after Pearl Harbor was controlled by an Anglo-American committee known as the Combined Chiefs of Staff, operating under the close supervision of the Prime Minister of Great Britain and the President of the United States. Of this committee neither the British Dominions nor any of the other Allied governments were members.

Mr. Churchill considered himself, undoubtedly, as representing not only the United Kingdom but the whole of the Commonwealth in the strategic discussions of this phase. After the great conferences where strategic plans were approved he normally sent to each Dominion government a highly secret communication describing the decisions. These cables varied in frankness, but they tended to be reticent on the details of future operations. Thus after the Casablanca Conference, in the message sent to Canada, the planned invasion of Sicily was referred to merely as "future amphibious offensive operations on a large scale".<sup>22</sup>

As was to be expected, this highly personal channel of information sometimes broke down. The basic decision taken in July 1942 to proceed with operations in the Mediterranean in preference to an early attack across the English Channel, was of great importance to Canada, since a large Canadian force had now been concentrated in England and was preparing for the cross-Channel operation. Nevertheless, no communication to Canada concerning the results of this conference has been found. At the same moment the military information channel, from the Chief of the Imperial General Staff to General McNaughton, also failed to operate. This double breakdown was probably due to the fact that both Mr. Churchill and Sir Alan Brooke left the United Kingdom soon after the decision was taken. The result was that neither the Canadian Government nor its senior commander in England heard of the decision for several weeks.<sup>23</sup>

Under the conditions I have sketched, the Dominions' participation in strategic control, even before Pearl Harbor, was relatively slight. It was felt chiefly at those moments when new phases of the war were opening, particularly phases in which Dominion forces were likely to be involved. When in April 1940 the War Office requested that part of the Canadian force in England be made available for action in Norway, General McNaughton concurred without immediately informing his government. The authorities in Ottawa objected strongly to this procedure, although they did not interfere with the projected movement of the troops; and it was thus made clear that Canadian forces could not be committed to a new theatre without previous discussion with the Canadian Government.<sup>24</sup> At a later stage of the war that government, anxious to get its long-idle Army into action, brought strong pressure upon Mr. Churchill to get first a Canadian division and subsequently a Canadian corps into the operations in the Mediterranean theatre. Later still, when it appeared that there was a possibility of a



Canadian force being sent into Greece, Mr. King made it clear to Mr. Churchill that this could not be done without prior Canadian consent.<sup>25</sup>

At the time when an earlier enterprise in Greece was being planned, in the spring of 1941, it was essential for the British Government to obtain the concurrence of Australia and New Zealand in the action being taken, for it would largely be carried out by their troops. Both Dominion governments agreed, but both were inclined to make conditions. New Zealand was willing to have its division take part on the understanding that it was fully equipped and accompanied by an armoured brigade.<sup>26</sup> Australia, having been frankly warned that the operation was chancy and might end in an evacuation, initially made her consent conditional upon shipping and other essential services being available for the purpose.<sup>27</sup>

It is interesting that at this moment the Australians proposed that their Corps Commander in the Middle East, Sir Thomas Blamey, should be given command of the force going to Greece. When Mr. Menzies proposed this at a meeting of the British War Cabinet, the idea was not accepted, apparently on the ground that the bulk of the force would be United Kingdom troops.<sup>28</sup> This might ultimately have been the case had the expedition not been thrown out of Greece before all the British ancillary troops intended for it could be sent in. As it was, however, the actual fighting formations sent in, apart from the single British armoured brigade, were all from Australia and New Zealand. Whether the appointment of General Blamey would have contributed to producing either a greater degree of success or a worse disaster than that which actually took place under the auspices of General "Jumbo" Wilson is one of the ifs of history. It is pretty clear that no commander, however competent, could have overcome the difficulties that Wilson faced.

It is evident that the British invariably (and inevitably) preferred one of their own commanders, who would not question their orders, to a Dominion commander who would be serving two masters. Doubtless it was also true that, as General Crerar wrote in 1944 in connection with the command of the Canadian Corps in Italy, "No Canadian, or American, or other 'national' commander, unless possessing quite phenomenal qualities, is ever rated quite as high as an equivalent Britisher".<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, in spite of a widely prevalent opinion to the contrary, it would be dangerous to assume either that every British officer is necessarily stupid or that every Dominion officer is necessarily a genius.

The proposal to appoint General Blamey to command in Greece is described in the Australian official history. It does not seem to be mentioned in the United Kingdom history. However, the latter book contains the following passage: "The Australian Government... had the satisfaction of seeing General Blamey, immediately on his return from Greece, become Deputy Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, on General Wavell's recommendation. This was a clear recognition



of the right of the Dominion Forces to have a share in the shaping of military policy at a high level."<sup>30</sup> In the shaping of policy the appointment of Deputy Commander might mean much or comparatively little. It was evidence, at any rate, of the need which the British felt for conciliating Dominion feeling.\*

The acceptance of this appointment for Blamey parallels the Australian advocacy of an Imperial War Cabinet. Australia was evidently anxious for a share in planning. The Canadian Government seems to have taken a somewhat different line. It was less interested in having a share in the planning than in having an assurance from its own experts that the plans when made were militarily sound and had a reasonable prospect of success. Such assurances were given the government by General McNaughton before the raid on Dieppe and before the commitment of Canadian troops to the invasion of Sicily, and by General Crerar, who had now taken command of the First Canadian Army, before the invasion of Normandy.<sup>31</sup> On this basis the government approved the participation of its forces in the operations. These exchanges were domestic matters. I cannot find that the Canadian Government ever added to the embarrassments of a Commander-in-Chief facing the enemy by attaching conditions to the employment of its forces.

There were at least two occasions when the Australian Government made what the British Prime Minister considered rather serious practical difficulties. One was in 1941 when the Australians insisted that their division holding the isolated fortress of Tobruk be relieved, even though this involved interference with plans for a new offensive in the desert and embarrassment to the Navy. The other "painful episode" was Australia's refusal in February 1942, despite urging by both Churchill and Roosevelt, to permit an Australian division then on its way home from the Middle East to be diverted to Rangoon. These episodes are described in Sir Winston's book, and the Australian case in the former one is stated in one of the published volumes of the Australian history.<sup>32</sup>

## VI

As I said in the beginning, this paper has had to be largely an account of problems and difficulties; but it would be unrealistic to end on this note. On balance, military cooperation within the Commonwealth in 1939-45 was efficient and effective. The independence of the Dominions was respected without any serious adverse effect upon the prosecution

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\*General Blamey served two masters: he continued to be G.O.C. A.I.F. while also serving as Deputy Commander. This was obviously an awkward arrangement, and at the time of the Tobruk difficulty in 1941 (below) Blamey asked to be relieved of the British appointment. The Australian Government, however, insisted upon his retaining it (Long, Greece, Crete and Syria, 542n.).



of the war or the efficiency of the British forces in the field. The need for such respect created an additional problem for the British authorities; but such problems arise in any coalition, and those arising within the Commonwealth were easier to resolve than those with foreign countries.

The insoluble problem of efficiency versus sovereignty came, it seems to me, about as close to solution as it is ever likely to. I think it can be claimed that the Dominions showed themselves worthy of their new national independence; for though they put a proper value upon their sovereignty there were few instances, if any, where they placed it before the interests of the common cause. The general handling of the problem within the Commonwealth can be plausibly represented as an outstanding example of political and military common sense.

On the purely military level cooperation in the field was usually remarkably smooth and satisfactory. Powerful common traditions and historical associations provided a continuing basis and pattern. And while the Dominion forces had doubts about British leadership at certain times and places, on the whole they seem to have found it preferable to any other leadership that was available to them -- always excepting their own.

In this connection it may be relevant to refer to a still more recent episode. During the years 1951-53 a Commonwealth Division served and fought under the United Nations flag in Korea. The largest proportion of its units came from the United Kingdom, but it also included a brigade group from Canada, two infantry battalions from Australia, an artillery regiment from New Zealand and even a medical unit from India. The divisional headquarters was collected from all over the Commonwealth; thus the divisional commander was a British major general, but his senior staff officer was a Canadian lieutenant colonel. This extraordinarily mixed formation, in which the various national units were necessarily very intimately associated, was I think universally considered a most efficient and formidable military team; and I have never heard that the slightest serious difficulty ever arose between the national groups within it.\* The 1st Commonwealth Division provided practical evidence that the Commonwealth relationship is still a very real thing under the conditions of the present day. In this respect the experience of Korea merely served to reinforce the larger and longer experience of the Second World War.

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\*This passage was read to Colonel E.D. Danby, the first G.S.O. 1 of the Commonwealth Division, who fully concurred in its soundness. He added the remark that when the divisional headquarters was formed the officers composing it arrived from different parts of the world and had no knowledge of one another; nevertheless, the headquarters functioned smoothly and efficiently from the beginning.



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M E M O R A N D U M

15 Oct 56

D HistThe Visiting Forces (British Commonwealth)  
Acts as enacted by the Imperial and  
Dominion Parliaments

1. The Statute of Westminster, an Act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom, came into force on 11 December 1931. In consequence of the passage of this Act the Imperial and Dominion Governments considered it desirable that separate legislations be passed, by the parliaments concerned, dealing with the questions of command, discipline and attachments of Commonwealth forces when serving together.
2. The Union of South Africa was the first to take action in this connection when it passed the "Defence Act (Amendment) and Dominion Forces Act, 1932". This is described as "Act No. 32 of 1932" and was assented to on 30 May 1932. This was described as an Act "To make special provision for the maintenance of discipline in the defence forces of the Union and further to amend the South Africa Defence Act, 1912, in this respect; to make provision with respect to the armed forces of other members of the British Commonwealth of Nations when present in the Union; with respect to the cooperation between and joint command of Union forces and such other forces and with respect to deserters from such other forces."
3. The Parliament of the United Kingdom was next in line. It passed the "Visiting Forces (British Commonwealth) Act, 1933." This Act received Royal Assent on 29 March 1933 (23 Geo.5.Ch.6.). It was described as "An Act to make provision with respect to forces of His Majesty from other parts of the British Commonwealth when visiting the United Kingdom or a colony; with respect to the exercise of command and discipline when forces of His Majesty from different parts of the Commonwealth are serving together; with respect to the attachment of members of one such force to another such force, and with respect to deserters from such forces." Canada, Australia and New Zealand passed Acts having much the same preamble. All these Acts, unlike the Act passed by the Union of South Africa, were new Acts and not amendments to existing legislation.
4. The Canadian legislation was entitled "The Visiting Forces (British Commonwealth) Act, 1933" and received Royal Assent on 12 April 1933 (23-24 George V, Chapter 21).



5. The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia did not pass an Act dealing with the matter until 1939 when the "Defence (Visiting Forces) Act 1939", assented to on 29 May 1939, was passed. This Act was described as "Act No. 5 of 1939". The Act was passed during the First Session of the Fifteenth Parliament.

6. The New Zealand Act, which received Royal Assent on 6 October 1939, was entitled "Visiting Forces Act 1939". (3 Geo VI - 1939, No. 36).

7. The contents of these five Acts were substantially the same. The Australian and New Zealand Acts, however, contained a Section not to be found in the others. This Section restricted the penalty that could be imposed upon a member of these forces, to the penalty that could be made by the law of either country for a similar offence.

8. The Canadian Act named the Governor in Council as the authority to attach members of other forces to the Canadian forces and place members of the Canadian forces at the disposal of the service authorities of other Commonwealth countries. The other Acts name Government Departments as the authority for such action. The original Canadian legislation named the Minister of National Defence as the authority but this was changed to Governor in Council prior to the passage of the Act. The background of this action is discussed in the following paragraphs.

9. The Canadian legislation was introduced on 2 March 1933. It was discussed in detail on 6 and 23 March 1933. Third reading and passage of the Bill took place on 24 March 1933 without discussion. Royal Assent was given on 12 April 1933 (23-24 George V).

10. There is no indication that the Canadian Government considered that the legislation might serve as a basis for cooperation in time of war. All speeches and remarks made by Mr. Bennett (the Prime Minister), who piloted the legislation through the various stages of consideration, indicated a firm desire to avoid any such impression.

11. During the debate, Mr. King voiced the opinion that the legislation was capable of the interpretation of relating to possible service of Commonwealth forces together in time of war. He stated that he did not rule out the possibility that this was indeed the purpose of the legislation. He felt that it would be possible for the Minister of National Defence to send individuals from Canada, in case of war, without the authority either of the Governor in Council or of Parliament; he feared that these individuals could eventually



be grouped into detachments, squadrons, etc. Mr. Bennett went to great lengths to prove these fears unfounded. He sought the advice of a "legal adviser of the Department of External Affairs" regarding Mr. King's statements. After reading portions from the opinions of the legal adviser, Mr. Bennett went on to say "this statute is prepared for one purpose and one purpose only, that is to enable individuals that are attached to the forces of the United Kingdom or of one of the other dominions to be properly governed without being re-commissioned". Regarding the possibility of individuals becoming detachments he informed the House that "the legal adviser was of the opinion it would not be possible for them to become a detachment after they had gone". To meet one of Mr. King's objections, Section 6(2) of the proposed Act, which authorized the Minister of National Defence to take certain action, was amended by substituting "Governor in Council" for the "Minister". Mr. Bennett promised Mr. King that, after the enactment of the legislation, the Government would communicate with other Commonwealth countries and suggest that Canada desired to add to its bill the following words:-  
"Nothing in this bill contained shall be taken or construed as authorizing the dispatch of any forces from Canada in time of war otherwise than is provided by the laws of the dominion." I have been unable to find any further mention of this proposal.

Sgd: L.R. Cameron

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