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SUPREME ALLIED COMMANDER

By Caroline Reed

The directive was clear: “You will enter the continent of Europe and, in conjunction with the other United Nations, undertake operations aimed at the heart of Germany and the destruction of her armed forces.”¹ Dwight D. Eisenhower believed strongly in the importance of compromise and teamwork when leading an army. As Supreme Allied Commander in World War II, Eisenhower strove to follow his philosophy of cooperation during the planning for D-Day and beyond in Operation Overlord.

Eisenhower believed deeply in a team philosophy when working with the army, especially if one was a commander of some kind. To Eisenhower, “any action which hurt the creation of an effective team was contemptible.”² He had come to this philosophy under the influence of his mentor, Fox Conner.³ Comparing war to football, Ike believed that both required hard work, cooperation, and leadership qualities to be successful.⁴

When George Patton first introduced Eisenhower to Fox Conner he started a friendship and mentorship that influenced the rest of Eisenhower’s career. From their first meeting both men impressed with each other. Conner was impressed by the answers Ike gave him to his military questions, and in turn Ike was impressed that Conner asked them.⁵ In 1922, Eisenhower was transferred to Panama under the command of Conner.

During Ike’s time in Panama, Conner taught him a great many things about military history, maps, international politics, and Ike himself as a soldier. Eisenhower was never fascinated with military history until Conner introduced it to him in a way that was more interesting and thought provoking than the rote memorization required at West Point.⁶ From then on, Ike devoured books about military history and theory. He studied maps

¹ Carlo D’Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier’s Life* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2002), 490.

² Kerry Irish, “Dwight Eisenhower and Douglas MacArthur in the Philippines: There Must Be a Day of Reckoning,” *Journal of Military History* 74, no. 4 (July/August 2013): 452.

³ *Ibid.*, 453.

⁴ Merle Miller, *Ike the Soldier: As They Knew Him* (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1987), 31.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁶ Merle Miller, *Ike the Soldier: As They Knew Him* (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1987), 210.

extensively and constantly worked with Conner to create routes and battle plans in case the Panama Canal was attacked.⁷ Conner taught Eisenhower “to submit everything in the form of a five-paragraph field order.”⁸ This taught Eisenhower how to explain battle plans and tactics thoroughly. In short, Conner taught Eisenhower important aspects of being a soldier that could only be learned through experience and he taught it in a way that captured Ike’s attention.

Most importantly though, were Conner’s ideas about the international situation of the time. Conner was convinced, just by reading the Treaty of Versailles that another big war was upon them.⁹ He stressed to Eisenhower the inevitability of this fact: “Conner’s experience in France in the First World War had convinced him that without strong leadership the Allies might again become what he called ‘their own worst enemies.’”¹⁰ Conner did not want the United States to have to ally herself with other nations in another great war. However, he recognized the necessity of an alliance so he stressed to Eisenhower that it had to be done differently than in World War I.¹¹ Cooperation between the Allied powers would be key in another major war and it required a commander who knew how to accomplish that. Eisenhower became the strong leader that Conner foresaw to be the savior of the Allied cause.¹²

While Eisenhower did not give full credit to Conner for the way he conducted himself as Supreme Allied Commander, he did acknowledge that, aside from his parents, Conner was the most influential person in his life.¹³ However, once World War II began, Ike almost certainly recognized Conner’s amazing foresight and the truth of his words. Conner taught him so much about war during their stay in Panama that Ike would have been foolish to ignore him.

Ike worked on his ability to cooperate with difficult people and overcome difficult situations during his time in the Philippines. In 1935

⁷ Ibid., 211.

⁸ Ibid., 209.

⁹ Ibid., 212.

¹⁰ Ibid., 213.

¹¹ Carlo D’Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier’s Life* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2002), 169.

¹² Merle Miller, *Ike the Soldier: As They Knew Him* (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1987), 213.

¹³ Carlo D’Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier’s Life* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2002), 169.

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Eisenhower was sent to work under General Douglas MacArthur in the Philippines. The United States was trying to get the Filipino Army ready for independence. MacArthur, Eisenhower, and the rest of their staff went to the Philippines to aid in this effort. The impossibility of the job they attempted to do and the frustrations that MacArthur created for everyone, especially Eisenhower, served to prepare Ike for the enormous task of leading D-Day.¹⁴ Eisenhower had already worked under MacArthur in the United States, but in many ways it was even more difficult to do in the Philippines. MacArthur was a hard person to work for in general. The relationship between Eisenhower and MacArthur was a rocky one but it worked.¹⁵ Both men had big egos and big tempers, and Eisenhower was not afraid to stand up to him, despite the fact that MacArthur was his senior officer.¹⁶ Ike continuously had to mediate between MacArthur and the President of the Philippines, Manuel Quezon, because there were constant misunderstandings. Life was better and easier whenever MacArthur and Quezon cooperated.¹⁷ In the Philippines Eisenhower learned how to deal with difficult and sometimes egotistical leaders as well as how to resolve disputes, both of which were helpful skills during his days as Allied Commander.

Immediately before his promotion, General Eisenhower was the Allied Commander in the Mediterranean region of the war, so he had experience on the ground as well as experience working with Allied forces. Interestingly enough, Eisenhower's appointment as Supreme Allied Commander seemed to be almost an afterthought by Franklin Roosevelt. Once it was decided that a British general would not lead Overlord, all eyes moved to which commander FDR would choose.¹⁸ Most assumed George Marshall would be chosen; Eisenhower was not even under consideration in the fall of 1943. However, as time went on, FDR felt more keenly the need to keep Marshall in the United States as Chief of Staff because he excelled at his job.¹⁹ On December 7, 1943 FDR met Eisenhower and without introduction gave him command of Overlord. FDR himself said that "Eisenhower is the best politician among the military men."²⁰ Indeed, Winston Churchill and

¹⁴ Ibid., 240.

¹⁵ Ibid., 239.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Carlo D'Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier's Life* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2002),

461.

¹⁹ Ibid., 466.

²⁰ Ibid., 467.

Eisenhower, despite their many arguments, had a better relationship and understanding of one another than Churchill and Marshall did.²¹ This good relationship between the two men proved to be important, as D-Day planning got under way.

Almost immediately after his appointment as Supreme Allied Commander, Eisenhower began suggesting men to be his fellow commanders. He knew he needed men he could trust and who valued Allied cooperation. According to D'Este, "Eisenhower placed his personal stamp of approval on every division commander or higher.... No officer was selected whom he did not know personally."²² As early as 1943, Eisenhower wanted Omar Bradley as the American army group commander and either Harold Alexander or Bernard Montgomery as the overall ground commander. He was confident in Bradley's ability and he knew that either Alexander or Montgomery, though British, trusted Bradley.²³ In other words, they would work well together. Eisenhower seemed very optimistic about the team working for him when he wrote to Field Marshal William Birdwood that "happily, both countries have given to me, as immediate subordinates, leaders of proven worth... working along with these men are British and American leaders" whose only thought was of duty.²⁴ In the days ahead it was extremely important that the officers had the ability to work together during the best of times so that when the situation became very stressful, their disagreements might not be so harsh.

As the commander of an Allied force, Eisenhower had the daunting task of dealing with Churchill's big personality. However, because of his experience with MacArthur the task must have been easier for Ike. In fact, Churchill and Eisenhower had a good relationship and understanding of one another.²⁵ Their disagreements were nearly always resolved. As the military commander, Eisenhower stood his ground when he disagreed with the Prime Minister. Eisenhower even charmed Charles de Gaulle. Ike and de Gaulle had a rough relationship but Ike made a little headway to kindness by

²¹ *Ibid.*, 468.

²² Carlo D'Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier's Life* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2002), 468.

²³ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower: The War Years*, ed. Alfred D. Chandler, Jr. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1970), 3:1610.

²⁴ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower: The War Years*, ed. Alfred D. Chandler, Jr. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1970), 3:1680.

²⁵ Carlo D'Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier's Life* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2002), 468.

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flattering de Gaulle about his military wisdom.²⁶ In one letter, Eisenhower gave credit to de Gaulle for the elimination of some misunderstandings between the Free French and Americans.²⁷ Their relationship was never perfect but they made things work for the sake of the war.

Ike's easy-going manner extended to his fellow soldiers and commanders. Eisenhower was an excellent commander in that he "seemed able to ask an appropriate question or produce a suitable comment that established an immediate bond" with soldiers.²⁸ He was popular with his own American troops and with the British troops as well. He was keen to make sure that every soldier emulated the respect that he showed for men on both sides. In a letter to Maxwell Taylor, Ike was clearly disappointed that he had to deal with misconduct from American soldiers towards British soldiers and anxious that it not happen again.²⁹ Ike expected his fellow commanders and soldiers to follow the same line of cooperation and alliance that he did. Ike's naval aide, Harry Butcher, said in one of his speeches to SHAEF commanders, that Eisenhower "emphasized that in an Allied Command such as this he expects thoughts and words which indicate nationality to be erased."³⁰

One man on whom Eisenhower had to rely more than others was Bernard Montgomery. As Field Marshall, he was one of Ike's right hand men in Operation Overlord. Although Montgomery also considered cooperation to be important, he often left that aspect to Eisenhower. Montgomery was so strong and confident in himself that it was difficult for him to get along with his allies.³¹ He believed that it was important to be close to his men but his personal qualities and supreme confidence made appeasement difficult for him.³² Eisenhower's self-control and ability to appease allowed the two men to maintain a good working relationship.³³

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 522.

²⁷ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower: The War Years*, ed. Alfred D. Chandler, Jr. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1970), 3:1637.

²⁸ Carlo D'Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier's Life* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2002), 514.

²⁹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower: The War Years*, ed. Alfred D. Chandler, Jr. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1970), 3:1682-1683.

³⁰ Harry C. Butcher, *My Three Years with Eisenhower: The Personal Diary of Captain Harry C. Butcher, USNR, Naval Aide to General Eisenhower, 1942 to 1945* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), 472.

³¹ R. J. Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 145.

³² R. J. Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 145.

³³ *Ibid.*

From his earlier Allied operations during the war, Eisenhower recognized the need for a staff that integrated ground, air, naval, and logistics.³⁴ Operation Overlord was a major coordination between two countries so everything in the planning, down to the last detail, had to work together like a well-oiled machine. With that in mind, Ike insisted on a single headquarters for those commanders and officers participating in Overlord.³⁵ He wanted his commanders in each area to see themselves as occupying both the role of the staff worker who helped develop plans and of the executor of those plans on the ground, air, or water.³⁶ He wanted to have a single, overall ground commander to lead both British and American forces and also coordinate with their respective air forces.³⁷ He actually saw separate British and American commanders as “destructive of the essential coordination between ground and air forces.”³⁸

COSSAC, or the Chief of Staff to the Supreme Allied Commander, formed before Eisenhower joined as the official Commander. COSSAC did not have much direction before Eisenhower. Their main accomplishment was the choice of Normandy as the landing site. However, that in and of itself was “one of the best examples of Anglo-American cooperation of the entire war” because they finally untangled months and months of planning.³⁹ Eisenhower agreed with the invasion site but also recommended that they widen the invasion and make it more of a frontal assault than a pincer.⁴⁰ It would be easier to capture the beach and subsequent towns if the assault were bigger, faster, and stronger in number.

In Ambrose’s words, “a successful Overlord meant, in practice, getting ashore and staying.”⁴¹ There were many, many issues to work out in the coming operation. The operation would be the biggest undertaking of any

³⁴ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948), 221.

³⁵ Carlo D’Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier’s Life* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2002), 484.

³⁶ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948), 221.

³⁷ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower: The War Years*, ed. Alfred D. Chandler, Jr. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1970), 3:1610.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 3:1609.

³⁹ Carlo D’Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier’s Life* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2002), 470.

⁴⁰ R. J. Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 145.

⁴¹ Stephen E. Ambrose, *The Supreme Commander: The War Years of General Dwight D. Eisenhower* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 329.

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Ally in the war. However, there were three main factors on which the operation relied. First, the Allies needed to be able to supply the soldiers on the ground. Second, they needed to keep the Germans from a sufficient build-up of arms that would stop them. Finally, of course, the Germans could not know what was coming.⁴²

The first of these factors was a huge naval undertaking the likes of which served as a perfect example of Alfred Thayer Mahan's theories about sea power.⁴³ The problem of this huge undertaking was not how to get the ships organized and to the right location. As Richard Overy points out, that "was a task for which British and American seamanship was well equipped."⁴⁴ Rather, the main problem was that there was no place for the ships to anchor. Eisenhower said that the solution was "a project so unique as to be classed by many scoffers as completely fantastic."⁴⁵ The Allies essentially created their own harbor on D-Day out of old ships that they sunk off the coast. Also constructed were pieces called a "mulberries" that allowed vehicles and equipment to drive off the ships and onto the beach.⁴⁶

One of the biggest points of contention was the proposed Transportation Plan that aimed to destroy French communications in order to keep the Germans from a build-up of arms in France.⁴⁷ Even though Eisenhower sought to use the air force only to destroy key communication points and rail lines rather than population centers, many politicians, including Churchill, were horrified by the possible loss of civilian life.⁴⁸ Eisenhower understood the importance of preserving civilian life, yet as a military commander he also understood that in war the ends must justify the means. In fact, he was often frustrated by the fact that many people did not recognize that the decisions he had to make were often difficult and risky.⁴⁹ During his time as assistant army chief of staff, Ike's secretary said of him that "every problem was carefully analyzed" and that he had an ability "to

⁴² R. J. Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 146.

⁴³ R. J. Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 147.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948), 234.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁴⁷ R. J. Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995): 148.

⁴⁸ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948), 232.

⁴⁹ Rick Atkinson, "The Road to D-Day," *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 4 (July/August 2013).

arrive at quick and confident decisions.”⁵⁰ This decision was no different. Once they received the ‘okay’ for the plan, Ike and his staff proved they made the right choice. The casualty numbers were not nearly as high as everyone thought they would be.⁵¹ While the effects on the railways were minimal, the air force did much damage to the “bridges and tunnels connecting the invasion area with the east.”⁵² The value of this plan was justified by the damage it did to the communications and transportation of the Germans, especially where the invasion area was concerned.

The third key piece to the plan of Overlord was called “Bodyguard.” Instead of trying to completely disguise the build-up of arms for Overlord, Allied intelligence decided to convince the Germans that an attack was going to happen in a completely different spot and time.⁵³ The Allies wished to convince the Germans that an attack would happen at Calais and in Scandinavia. To do this they created an entire fake army called FUSAG complete with dummy camps, fake supply depots, and rubber tanks in the southeast of England.⁵⁴ The deception effort required much cooperation on the part of United States and British Allied intelligence. They had to make sure they were sending out similar signals, and all politicians, commanders, and soldiers involved had to keep Overlord a complete secret while following along with the deception in a convincing way. The plan was such a risky gamble that even Eisenhower had a difficult time believing that it would work. He merely hoped that it would “tie down one or two German divisions” for maybe a few days.⁵⁵

Another major disagreement that occurred during the planning stage was about how much to rely on the air force. The landing on Utah Beach was essential to gaining Cherbourg, but it could not be taken without the air force. Because the beach was impossible to land on, the staff planned to drop United States paratroopers onto the beach.⁵⁶ Many people, such as Air Marshall Trafford Leigh-Mallory were feared the possible losses that the anti-

⁵⁰ Merle Miller, *Ike the Soldier: As They Knew Him* (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1987), 344-345.

⁵¹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948), 233.

⁵² R. J. Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), 149.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁵⁵ Carlo D’Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier’s Life* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2002), 506.

⁵⁶ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948), 240.

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aircraft around the beach would cause to the air force. Leigh-Mallory was adamant that the Utah landings were a huge waste of life.⁵⁷ Ike contended that the whole operation could not happen without the Utah landing and the Utah landing could not happen without this airborne assault.⁵⁸ His decision was actually popular with the airborne commanders because it showed that Ike had confidence in them to carry out their duties. The attack was carried out as planned, and the airborne operations were a success with fewer losses than expected.⁵⁹ Leigh-Mallory regretted doubting Eisenhower's decision and told him so in an apology letter sent on June 7.⁶⁰ Just as he did with the Transportation Plan, Eisenhower proved his ability to make confident decisions that made him worthy of his title Supreme Commander.

Carlo D'Este says, "No commander in military history faced a more daunting task than the one [Eisenhower] did in 1944", because "he was charged with welding together the largest force ever assembled."⁶¹ Overlord was an Allied operation that called for nothing less than the destruction of the German army. In order to succeed, Eisenhower put his earlier experiences with compromise and teamwork in the army into practice. Because of Eisenhower's efforts as Supreme Allied Commander, Operation Overlord became one of the most successful allied operations in history.

516. ⁵⁷ Carlo D'Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier's Life* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2002),

247. ⁵⁸ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948),

512. ⁵⁹ Carlo D'Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier's Life* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2002),

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 530.

506. ⁶¹ Carlo D'Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier's Life* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2002),