

# Tommy Burns as a Military Leader A Case Study using Integrative Complexity

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Lieutenant-General E.L.M. Burns is relatively well-known to Canadian military historians and to Canadians generally. A professional soldier born in 1897, Tommy Burns attended the Royal Military College, leaving before graduation to serve with the Canadian Corps in France and Flanders during the Great War. He saw much action, won the Military Cross, and decided to remain in the tiny Canadian Permanent Force after the Armistice. Burns rose with rapidity in the interwar years, his career helped by brilliant performance at the British Army Staff College, Quetta, and selection for the Imperial Defence College, London. He had powerful patrons, senior officers such as Harry Crerar who admired his intelligence and skills as a staff officer, traits that occasionally camouflaged his sarcasm and lack of traditional leadership qualities of the kind that can make men willing to follow an officer into battle.

At the same time, Burns' restless mind was searching for other outlets. He began writing articles in H.L. Mencken's *American Mercury*, the magazine of the 1920s. He published a play and a novel, and he wrote sketches for the theatre. And at the same time, the *Canadian Defence Quarterly*, the military's one interwar intellectual outlet, featured a stimulating debate on the use of armour between Burns and a young captain, Guy Simonds, who was to develop into the best general Canada was to produce in World War II. Burns, in other words was a man of parts.

At the outbreak of war in 1939, Lieutenant-Colonel Burns was in Britain attending the Imperial Defence College. He soon had himself attached to the Canadian High Commission, preparing for the arrival of the first Canadian contingent. In mid-1940 he returned to Canada to work for the new Chief of the General Staff, General Crerar, as a colonel, and the next year he took the plum position of Brigadier General Staff to Lieutenant-General A.G.L. McNaughton, commanding the Canadian Corps in the United Kingdom. Burns' career was on the rise—until postal censors in May 1941 intercepted mail to his mistress in Montreal and took exception to some of Brigadier Burns' views about the war, British commanders, and Canadian attitudes. Returned to Canada in disgrace, Burns narrowly escaped court-martial though he was reduced in rank to colonel.

Such a blow might have finished the career of a lesser man, but Burns rose again to become a brigade commander, a division commander in Britain and in Italy, and then in early 1944 commander of I Canadian Corps as it fought its way up the Italian boot. Burns' men helped break the Hitler Line and successfully cracked the Gothic Line, major battles that ought to have made his reputation. It was not to be. Burns never got on with his "huntin' and fishin'" British superiors, and his personality failed to impress itself on either his division commanders or his troops. A British attempt to get rid of him in July 1944 was blocked only by a major effort on

the part of General Crerar, commanding First Canadian Army, who despatched the Chief of Staff at Canadian Military Headquarters, London, Lieutenant-General Kenneth Stuart, to Italy to investigate. Stuart did so, talking not only to British officers but also discussing Burns' performance with his subordinates. A second attempt to oust Burns, this one initiated by his senior Canadian field and staff officers in October 1944, was more successful, and Burns, relieved of his command and reduced in rank to major-general at the beginning of November, spent the final months of the war in unimportant rear area positions.

After the war, Burns worked for the Department of Veterans Affairs in Ottawa, ultimately becoming its deputy minister, and then as commander of the United Nations Truce Supervisory Organization in Palestine. In November 1956, in the midst of the Suez Crisis, he created the United Nations Emergency Force that helped restore a kind of peace to the Egyptian-Israeli border. His reputation on the rise again, Burns regained his rank of lieutenant-general and in 1960 became Canada's Ambassador for Disarmament. By the time of his death in 1986, he was a much revered figure.<sup>1</sup>

Most of this is reasonably well-known, not least through Burns' own voluminous (if relatively discreet) contemporaneous and autobiographical writings.<sup>2</sup> But what was going through his mind when he was writing in crisis? What if we could assess his ability to make decisions and to process the flood of information that fell upon him at the crucial points in his career? Moreover, what if we could compare how Burns acted in crisis and how he wrote about it later?

Military leadership and its failings have always fascinated scholars. Consider N.F. Dixon's well-known *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* (London, 1979) which looked devastatingly at British commanders of the last two hundred years. To Dixon, neurotic authoritarians were virtually doomed to fail as leaders because of their obstinate rigidity, their compulsive desire for control, their inability to cope with dissonance, and

their stubborn anti-intellectualism. Psychologists quarrel with the lack of empirical rigidity in Dixon's analyses, but they note approvingly that he recognized that personality characteristics interact with environmental factors. Dixon talked about the information overload that frequently overwhelms commanders, and he understood that biological and physical factors, not least illness and sensory impairment, affect decision-making. Can Dixon be taken a step further?

Psychologists who have studied cognitive functioning and decision-making have developed ways of measuring what they call integrative complexity. Integrative complexity, roughly definable as the ability to process information, ranges from rigid, egocentric, poorly differentiated judgements at the simple end of the continuum to flexible, integrative and empathetic responses at the complex end. Such a tool can readily be applied to political leadership in international crises<sup>3</sup> and to generalship.<sup>4</sup> The complexity of a commanders, we may hypothesize, is related to the likelihood that he will be influenced by other matters as well. These include the strength of his own and the opposing forces and the skills — not least in information-processing — of the commander on the other side of the hill.

At the simplest end of the complexity continuum, we might expect to find a rigid, authoritarian officer, one who "goes by the book" and acts without considering all available information and all possible plans. Is this necessarily self-defeating? Perhaps, but not necessarily so. there are situation in which this approach could be the most adaptive. It allows rapid decision-making and, with obvious self-confidence, it concentrates on a few salient issues and items of information, and allows for no vacillation or weakness. C.S. Foresters' fictional character in *The General* is a perfect prototype.

A highly complex commander, on the other hand, will seek out and process much more information, develop and monitor plans more flexibly and creatively, and be better able to

anticipate the reactions of his opponent. His weaknesses may include an unwillingness to stop searching for information and to make a firm decision, being led astray by minor bits of information, and the appearance of being unsure of his own mind.

The implications of studying integrative complexity should be clear. If the psychologists are correct in their approach, we might expect that innovativeness, tactical flexibility, an ability to read the apparent tactical plans and mind of the opponent, and a willingness to seek out information and to consider it seriously will be very helpful to a commander with a high level of complexity. Skill at information processing, in other words, can bring victory, especially against a superior foe or when a difficult situation requires an especially creative approach. By the same token, the virtues associated with a low level of complexity—doggedness, a refusal to consider being distracted by too much information, and a penchant for a straightforward strategy—might well lead to success in some campaigns.

But how can we measure integrative complexity retroactively? In fact, although they are virtually unknown to historians, many studies by psychologist have done so,



*Above and Below: Lieutenant-General E.L.M. "Tommy" Burns in Italy, March 1944.*

taking samples of the subject's writing and scoring them paragraph by paragraph along a scale with nodal points of 1 (very low differentiation), 3 (differentiation, no integration), 5 (differentiation, some integration), and 7 (high levels of differentiation and integration). Transitional scores (2, 4 or 6) are assigned to passages that show some aspects of the next higher nodal score but do not clearly meet the criteria for that score. Any connected verbal discourse can be scored for integrative complexity in this way, and trained scorers can do the task with a high degree of inter-scorer agreement.<sup>5</sup> Table 1 gives an example of Burns' writing at each of the four main nodal points.

With Burns we are fortunate to have both material he wrote contemporaneously as well as memoirs written some 15 years later. This allows analysis and comparison of Burns' three major professional crises during the 1941-1945 period: his near court-martial in

**Table 1**  
**Examples of Complexity Scoring**

**One point of view, dismissal of opposing perspective. Score=1**

"Captain Hart sets down a myopic argument to the effect that Foch was converted from the "Napoleonic fallacy" and led to give more importance to "economic objectives" by the experience in the Ruhr. How a "war" in which one of the combatants had no army (or none to speak of) can prove anything about war in general, I am unable to see." (from Burns' review of B.H. Lidell Hart's *the remaking of Modern Armies in Canadian Defence Quarterly*, October 1927.)

**Consideration of different aspects and dimensions, acceptance of conflict or disagreement. Score=3**

"In the space available I have not been able to deal fully with the "Napoleonic fallacy" theory, but no doubt enough has been said—perhaps too much—for this chapter in Captain Hart's book is only 23 pages of 312, and the rest is invariably sensible, persuasive, and full of suggestive ideas. Particularly interesting are the chapters on light tanks, gas, infantry tactics, and training. . . "The Dominions and Mechanisation" should excite a good deal of argument. Capt. Hart suggests that as the purpose of the Dominion forces is primarily defensive, motorised machine gun battalions would give a more valuable return for the money expended than the present orthodox though only partially organized forces of all arms." (*Ibid.*)

**Synthesis of two contradictory aims by a combined solution. Score=5**

"The solution to these opposed requirements is to advance on a broad front and concentrate the attack. The extent of front on which it is possible to attack is usually determined by the number of guns and tanks available; but it should be as wide as possible, consistent with effective neutralisation of the enemy Small Arms and mortar fire and adequate tank support." (Burns' "Notes on Tactical Methods," October 1944.)

**Consideration of different dimensions, combined solution using higher-order categorization schemata. Score=7**

"It must be remembered that as the fighting troops are increasingly composed of reinforcement who have not had company and platoon training, nor training in co-operation with tanks, the type of operation must be simplified. Highly trained troops can fight their way forward, by companies, calling down artillery concentrations and making plans to overcome each situation, and this can frequently be done with small losses. But when most of the troops are only partially trained simplicity must be the keynote, together with heavy fire support. The simplest form of attack is for the infantry and tanks to follow a heavy barrage closely, going straight through to an objective, only clearing out the enemy lying directly in the path. But this must be combined with thorough mopping up." (*Ibid.*)

1941, the British criticism of his leadership in June 1944, and the revolt of his division commanders in September-October 1944.<sup>6</sup>

In the first of these. Burns' personal indiscretion in 1941, we find increased complexity in correspondence he wrote at the time. This reaction, commonly found among outstanding men facing such crises, reflects a mustering of intellectual resources to consider the dimensions and details of a problem and how to solve it.<sup>7</sup> Upon reinstatement of the upward path of his career,

Burns' complexity level also went up, the result of coping successfully with the new and complicated problems he faced and mastered as a brigade and division commander.

His complexity then decreased during his time as Corps commander, a time of almost constant professional criticism from his British superiors. Burns' decline appeared in his first experience as a Corps commander in action, the confusion and heavy casualties of the May 1944 attack on the Hitler Line. It

became worse when his leadership came under attack from Generals Leese and Alexander, criticism so severe that he had to replace several of his staff officers while his own position was saved only by the extraordinary exertions of his Canadian superiors. Complexity reduction during such periods of ongoing stress and declining resources to continue dealing with such stress is predicted by both stress and complexity theories.<sup>8</sup> And no wonder. A similar pattern was found in the complexity changes of General Robert E. Lee as he endured fatigue, failure and ever-diminishing resources during the period from July 1863 to April 1864 as the American Civil War turned against the South.<sup>9</sup>

Burns' complexity increased during professional success as pressures and stress eased between July and September 1944. His I Canadian Corps successfully attacked the Gothic Line in September and for a time Burns basked in the praise of his superiors. Unfortunately for Burns, his senior commanders turned on him in October and forced his ouster. This release from stress led to increased complexity in October 1944. Again, General Lee's complexity followed a similar pattern as he came to accept the need to surrender at Appomattox.

Burns' memoirs consistently showed a higher complexity than his writings during the war, but his retrospective account followed the same general trends of increase and decrease. This is an interesting indication that reflecting upon past events can evoke reactions similar to those at the time, but—in relation to crises, at least—perhaps with greater attention, and a better understanding of the behaviour of the other protagonists. Burns was an unusually intelligent and thoughtful officer, of course; whether the memoirs of those who did not share such characteristics would show the same effects from retrospection remains to be studied.

While there has been a substantial body of work on political leaders and civilian elites, relatively little work has been devoted to studying how battlefield commanders handle the information they get and upon which they base their decisions. The importance of their

tactical and strategic choices is obviously vital, not only to the soldiers under their command but sometimes to the fate of their countries. Integrative complexity scoring, a technique which can be used at a distance, from available documentary sources, and at any time during and after an event, seems a technique that historians might profitably employ.

## NOTES

1. See J.L. Granatstein, *The Generals: The Canadian Army's Senior Commanders in the Second World War* (Toronto, 1993), Chapter 5.
2. See esp. E.L.M. Burns, *General Mud: Memoirs of Two World Wars* (Toronto, 1970).
3. See Peter Suedfeld and Philip Tetlock, "Integrative Complexity of Communications in International Crises," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, XXI (1977), 169ff; Peter Suedfeld *et al.*, "War, Peace, and Integrative Complexity: UN Speeches on the Middle East Problem, 1947-1976," *ibid.*, 427ff; Peter Suedfeld *et al.*, "Changes in Integrative Complexity Among Middle East Leaders during the Persian Gulf Crisis," *Journal of Social Issues*, XL (1993), 183ff.
4. See Peter Suedfeld *et al.*, "The Role of Integrative Complexity in Military Leadership: Robert E. Lee and His Opponents." *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, XVI (1986), 498ff.
5. Gloria Baker-Brown *et al.*, "The Conceptual/Integrative Complexity Scoring Manual," in C.P. Smith, *ed.*, *Motivation and Personality: Handbook of Thematic Content Analysis* (New York, 1992).
6. Suedfeld and Granatstein, "Leadership Complexity in Personal and Professional Crises: Concurrent and Retrospective Information Processing," under review, *Political Psychology*.
7. Peter Suedfeld and Susan Bluck, "Changes in Integrative Complexity Accompanying Significant Life Events: Historical Evidence," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, LXIV (1993), 124ff.
8. Hans Selye, *The Stress of Life* (Toronto, 1956); Harold M. Schroeder, *et al.*, *Human Information Processing* (New York, 1967).
9. Suedfeld *et al.*, "Lee and his Opponents."

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