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BOOK REVIEW

Operation Victory

by Major-General Sir Francis de Guingand, KBE, CB, DSO

*Hodder and Stoughton Ltd: London; 1947; 488 pp.; Ursula Davidson Library
cal no. 580.01/18,297*

One of the British Army's top staff officers in World War II, Major-General Sir Francis de Guingand served first as Chief of Staff, Eighth Army, 1942–43, and subsequently as Chief of Staff, 21st Army Group, 1944–45. In *Operation Victory*, he offers his personal account of the parts of the war of which he had first-hand knowledge.

De Guingand commences his narrative in 1939 with his duties as Military Assistant to the Secretary of State for War, Hore-Belisha, and describes the antecedent events leading to Hore-Belisha's resignation during the deployment of the British Expeditionary Force to Northern France. De Guingand's transfer to North Africa soon after permits him to follow the fortunes of the Western Desert Force under Lieutenant-General Sir Richard O'Connor's fine leadership. The westward thrust of the Western Desert Force in Cyrenaica after overwhelming the Italians was interrupted by the ill-fated Greek and Crete campaigns which de Guingand records in full. He nearly lost his life in an earthquake at Larissa during pre-deployment planning reconnaissance.

He compares the three commanders-in-chief under whom he directly served – Wavell, Auchinleck and Montgomery and, in a separate and revealing chapter of 30 pages, he describes Montgomery's personality, both as a man and a soldier, referring to him in the text nearly always as 'the Army Commander'.

In early 1942, de Guingand was Director of Military Intelligence, in Cairo. In July, 8th Army was formed from the Western Desert Force, with General Sir Claude Auchinleck in command and de Guingand as Brigadier General Staff – the chief-of-staff. Rommel's continuing successes during August provoked a change in command with Lieutenant-General Bernard Montgomery appointed to command 8th Army. Montgomery and "Freddie" de Guingand, as chief-of-staff, formed from the very start a strong, loyal, confident and mutually-understanding relationship, which was to last to the war's end.

The rolling victories of 8th Army during the latter part of 1942 are described in complete, strategic detail commencing with Alam Halfa in September, El Alamein in October, and El Agheila in December; through the Mareth Line to El Hamma; and Wadi Akarit to central Tunisia; and the final link-up with the First British Army component of the Allied Expeditionary Force (Operation TORCH) driving from the west, in April 1943.

De Guingand next masterfully describes the strategic planning and force movements of the allied invasion of Sicily by the British 8th Army and Patton's 7th United States Army; followed by the path of the 8th Army across the foot of Italy and its slow ascent along the east Italian coast, ultimately to the Sangro River bridgeheads. By

December 1943, speculation was rife as to who were to be the commanders of the "Second Front". Montgomery was appointed commander of 21st Army Group, and, with his close staff, returned to England on 31 December.

An excellent account follows of the development and planning of the Channel assault, the break-out east of Caen, details of the 'Falaise Pocket', the issues surrounding 'Market Garden' operations into Arnhem, the Allied responses to the German Ardennes Offensive, the retaking of Bastogne and St Vith, and ending with the Battles of the Rhineland from February to April 1945. In doing so, he presents the background of 21st Army Group's contentious proposal to make a single allied thrust across the Rhine following the German reversal at Falaise.

The final chapter describes de Guingand's particular role in heading the relief team which tackled the Dutch food shortage at war's end and the planning and administration of the surrender of all isolated German forces in Denmark, Holland and Northern Germany – some 1.5 million troops.

De Guingand's writing style is clear, uncluttered and very matter-of-fact, with a minimum of military abbreviations and jargon. Typical of his time in the British Forces, he knew and was known by most of the key Service players and accords them suitable recognition throughout the many campaigns. The book contains no photographs or diagrams, but the reader is aided in the strategic descriptions by 55 well-illustrated, unambiguous maps, which have been drawn specifically to illustrate the key points made in the text.

The author highlights some of the personal events which occurred during his three-and-a-half-year military journey from the Nile to the Baltic. He observes that, for membership of the large supporting staffs, Montgomery always backed youth and the "clever chap" (a favourite expression of Montgomery's) and de Guingand believes this paid Montgomery enormously.

In spite of the 63-year hiatus since its publication, this treatise contains sound, very useful opinions and advice for 21st century operational, strategic and senior planning-administrative commanders, as well as for commanders of combined operations. These many observations were made and opinions were formed entirely during de Guingand's battlefield experiences. As a consequence, *Operation Victory* is thoroughly recommended to the general reader and particularly to active-service personnel. It is available in the Ursula Davidson Library.



Bruce Short