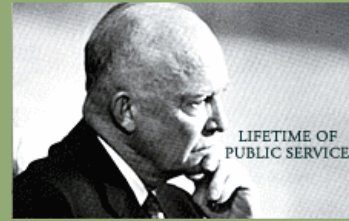


DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER MEMORIAL COMMISSION

It's time to build a national memorial to Dwight D. Eisenhower.



Eisenhower Stories

Ike and Monty – Command Collisions

The task of creating the tremendous war coalition of allies for the purpose of invading Nazi-occupied Europe was a matter requiring the cooperation of many governments. But the task of managing the combat operations of that coalition was up to a single individual, General Dwight D. Eisenhower. Ike went to great lengths to hold the coalition together. He worked hard to maintain cordial relations with his subordinate commanders as he exercised his duties as Supreme Commander. But Field Marshal Sir Bernard Law Montgomery of Great Britain created a series of contentious incidents that finally developed into a direct command collision with Ike near the end of the war. The situation came very close to ripping the alliance asunder.



Generals Eisenhower and Montgomery - D-Day 1944

Both Ike and Monty came from humble origins and earned their way to the top of their respective hierarchies. But there the similarities ended. With his warm smile and optimistic demeanor, Eisenhower welcomed frank discussion and was often willing to accommodate and even compromise in the interest of allied unity. Monty, on the other hand, was stubborn, rebarbative, and prone to self-aggrandizement at the slightest opportunity. Nothing induced Monty to compromise. Even Churchill once used the word “insufferable” when referring to Montgomery.

Though Eisenhower was Supreme Commander of the Allied forces invading Normandy in 1944, Montgomery had temporary command of allied ground troops for the duration of the assault on the beaches. After the beaches were secure and Ike’s headquarters had been established in Normandy, Monty would command all British and Canadian ground forces and Bradley would command the American armies. Montgomery and Bradley were to be co-equals under Eisenhower.

After the D-Day successes, the British government promoted Montgomery to field marshal (a non-existent rank in the U.S. Army). In the eyes of the Brits, this put Monty senior to Bradley and made permanent his status as commander of all allied ground forces on the continent. Thus, when Eisenhower moved his headquarters to Normandy — whereupon his jurisdiction was limited to command of British and Canadian ground forces — the British press and Montgomery bitterly expressed their displeasure at Monty having been “demoted.” In fact Monty had not been demoted and had known long in advance that his role would revert to equality with Bradley after the invasion succeeded. This knowledge, however, didn’t dissuade Monty from publicly agreeing with the British press and demanding that Eisenhower turn over all ground command to him. Ike stuck to the original plan.

As the war in Western Europe progressed Monty continually demanded to be appointed overall ground commander. Ike politely ignored the demands, but it became increasingly difficult for him to deal with Montgomery on major issues. The Combined Chiefs of Staff of Britain and America had approved, and never changed, Eisenhower’s basic “broad front” war strategy, but Monty continuously badgered Ike to abandon the broad front strategy and attack with a single overpowering “narrow” thrust into Germany. Of course, Monty’s demands always included himself as commander of the spear-like thrust.

Finally, Ike agreed to let Monty try his single thrust theory and approved his plan to drive 60 miles straight through Holland and enter Germany over the Arnhem Bridge. Eisenhower stopped the advance along the rest of the front and diverted the fuel and supplies to Montgomery for the attack. He also assigned two American paratroop divisions to assist the British forces. Historian Carlo D’Este later characterized Monty’s plan as, “. . .the most ill-conceived major operation of World War II.” After he lost the battle, Monty did his best to shift the blame to Eisenhower.

The final command collision happened after the Battle of the Bulge. On December 16, 1944 the German army launched a surprise attack into the American-held forests of the Ardennes along the German borders of Belgium and Luxembourg. The Wehrmacht employed 500,000 soldiers and 1,400 tanks to split the allied forces all the way to the Muse River thereby driving a huge bulge into the American lines. The bloody conflict lasted until the end of January when the American armies pushed the Germans back to their starting point. During the relentless fighting over 19,000 American and 100,000 German soldiers were killed. The British dead amounted to just over 200. It was, by any measure, the largest and deadliest American Army battle of the war. It was also a decisive American victory and the German army never again launched an offensive.

Field Marshal Sir Bernard Law Montgomery’s role in the Battle of the Bulge was to defend the northern shoulder of the Bulge throughout the conflict. He did it almost wholly with American divisions that Eisenhower temporarily transferred to his command early in the battle. While Montgomery held his position, American forces under Bradley and Patton attacked and eventually prevailed.

Towards the end of battle, Montgomery held a press conference, broadcast throughout Britain by the BBC, in which he announced that he had led the British Army to the victory and had saved the day for the Americans. The British press used banner headlines to report that Monty had rescued the Americans from certain defeat.

The American commanders were livid. Thoroughly embarrassed by Montgomery, Winston Churchill rose in the House of Commons to say that American soldiers won the battle and British forces played only a minor role. But nothing could be done to diminish the British media's adulation of Montgomery.

Picking the absolute worst time to further upset the supreme allied commander, Montgomery sent Eisenhower another letter demanding that he be promoted to ground-force commander of all allied forces facing Germany. He had finally pushed Ike beyond his limit of endurance with respect to such blatant insubordination. Montgomery's press conference, the resulting British press reports, and the letter demanding promotion all combined to blatantly suggest to the world that Ike could not handle battle command.

Eisenhower convened a staff meeting at his headquarters, which Monty's Chief of Staff Major General Francis de Guingand attended, and announced that he was relieving Montgomery of command. Ike circulated a cable he would send the Joint Chiefs of Staff requesting Monty's removal from office. Unlike his boss, Freddie de Guingand fully recognized that Montgomery would lose in any open confrontation and implored Ike to give him 24 hours to sort out the situation with Montgomery. Reluctantly, Ike agreed.

General de Guingand immediately flew to Montgomery's headquarters in Brussels and informed him that he would be replaced. It had not dawned on Monty that he had finally pushed Eisenhower too far and that he would lose his command. A chagrined Montgomery sat down and penned a letter to Eisenhower which he began with "Dear Ike" and ended with the words, "Very distressed that my letter may have upset you and I would ask you to tear it up. Your very devoted subordinate, Monty."

Eisenhower relented and did not send his cable. The crisis that might have split the alliance was over and Montgomery made no more public demands to be promoted. Nothing, however, would ever reduce the ill-will Monty had spread throughout the U.S. command by demeaning the battle quality of the American soldier.

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