RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

On the Psychology of Military Incompetence

Norman F Dixon

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About the Book

The Crimea, the Boer War, the Somme, Tobruk, Singapore, Pearl Harbour, Arnhem, the Bay of Pigs: just some of the milestones in a century of military incompetence, of costly mishaps and tragic blunders.

Are such blunders simple accidents – as the ‘bloody fool’ theory has it – or are they an inexorable result of the requirements of the military system?

In this superb and controversial book Professor Dixon examines these and other mistakes and relates them to the social psychology of military organization and to the personalities of some eminent military commanders. His conclusions are both startling and disturbing.

About the Author

Dr Norman F. Dixon, M.B.E., Fellow of the British Psychological Society, is Professor Emeritus of Psychology at University College London.

After ten years' commission in the Royal Engineers, during which time he was wounded ('largely through my own incompetence'), Professor Dixon left the Army in 1950 and entered university where he obtained a first-class degree in Psychology. He received the degrees of Doctor of Philosophy in 1956 and Doctor of Science in 1972, and in 1974 was awarded the University of London Carpenter Medal 'for work of exceptional distinction in Experimental Psychology'. He holds an honorary doctorate from the University of Lund. His other books include *Preconscious Processing, Subliminal Perception: the nature of a controversy*, which was described by Professor George Westby as 'one of the most substantial works of British psychology of recent years', and *Our Own Worst Enemy*, which *New Society* praised as 'an elegant play on man's chaotic nature … diverse and arresting'.

To Christine, Camilla and Rachel

ON THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MILITARY INCOMPETENCE

NORMAN DIXON

With a foreword by Brigadier Shelford Bidwell

Preface

This book is not an attack upon the armed forces nor upon the vast majority of senior military commanders, who, in time of war, succeed in tasks which would make the running of a large commercial enterprise seem child's play by comparison.

It is, however, an attempt to explain how a minority of individuals come to inflict upon their fellow men depths of misery and pain virtually unknown in other walks of life.

The book involves the putting together of contributions from a great many people—historians, sociologists, psychologists and of course soldiers and sailors. It is hoped that none of these will feel misrepresented in the final picture which their contributions make. For errors of fact, and for the opinions expressed, I alone take full responsibility.

In the writing of this book I owe a very great debt of gratitude to all those who gave generously of their time to reading and discussing earlier drafts. Their encouragement, criticisms and advice have been invaluable. In particular I would like to thank Mr Ronald Lewin, Captain Donald Macintyre, R.N., Brigadier Shelford Bidwell, Dr Penelope Dixon and Dr Hugh L'Etang for the many sorts of help they gave at every stage.

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Finally, I owe a debt of gratitude to that handful of people (who would probably prefer to remain nameless) whose hostility and dismay that anyone should write a book on military incompetence provided considerable, if unlooked-for, confirmation of the relationship between militarism and human psychopathology.

N.F.D.

Foreword

One day, I hope, someone will write the history of the impact of science on the conduct of warfare and also of what are loosely called ‘defence studies’. When he does, I am certain that he will find this book by Dr Norman Dixon, for which I am privileged to write a foreword, to have been an important landmark. Norman Dixon is specifically concerned with the subject of leadership on the highest level, or ‘generalship’, which he seeks to illuminate by bringing his own branch of science, experimental psychology, to bear; but before discussing his theme from the point of view of a professional military student, it might clear the ground, perhaps, if I adumbrated, or anticipated, the history of the relationship of scientists and soldiers.

We should begin by reminding ourselves that war is only partly a rational activity directed at useful goals or benefits, such as survival, or the acquisition of desirable territory. The classical military historian sees political or religious causes playing their part as irritants; the Marxist sees purely economic factors; while others, perhaps, see the cause and conduct of war as embedded in, and the consequence of, specific cultures. The study of warfare is, perhaps, a branch of sociology. To satisfy ourselves on this last point we do not have to go very far back in history or even to leave the present. Wars are not fought solely with ‘victory’ as the object – victory being defined, presumably, as a net gain of benefits over costs – but for ‘glory’. To achieve ‘glory’ the war had to be conducted according to certain rules, using only certain honourable weapons and between soldiers dressed in bizarre and often unsuitable

costumes. The bayonet, the sabre and the lance were more noble than the firearm (one British cavalry regiment on being issued with carbines for the first time in the mid-nineteenth century ceremonially put the first consignment into a barrow and tipped it on to the stable dung-pile).

The leaders of such armies were chosen from corps of officers who were not recruited primarily for prowess or intelligence, but because they conformed to certain social criteria. They, for instance, had to be noble, or to profess a certain religion, or, where nobility was not a passport to rank, to belong to the appropriate class or caste. This is why successful generals when they emerge appear to be freaks or mavericks; and also, perhaps, why such a maverick as Wellington found it necessary to convert himself into a British aristocrat in the course of his ascent to fame. It also accounts for the sudden appearance of a plethora of competent generals when the mould of a society is broken, as it was by the French and Russian Revolutions, or when a new, classless and casteless society evolves, as it did in the United States in the nineteenth century. The best generals on both sides in the American Civil War could probably have beaten any comparable team from Europe, for the war made the profession of generalship a career open to talent and freed it from the rule of the authoritarians who flourish in rigid societies.

The ‘scientific’ breakthrough really came in the early part of this century, and I would like to dwell on this for a moment in spite of the fact that it lies in the province of applied science and engineering rather than that of behavioural sciences. ‘Science’ was useful, but that there could be a ‘science’ of war in the sense that scientific modes of thought could be used in strategic problems was incomprehensible. Navies remained rigidly authoritarian in outlook and hierarchical in structure, but at the same time our Royal Navy, for instance, was extraordinarily open-minded and imaginative in the purely technical field. The

great battleships of 1914 had highly sophisticated systems of fire control, equipped, even, with rudimentary analogue computers; the importance of the submarine was grasped; and naval aviation pioneered. Unfortunately, on land, in the First World War, the tactics of Malplaquet or Borodino were combined with the killing power of modern technology, with the bloodiest of results. This tragedy did not arise solely from incompetence: the march of science so far had provided weapons to kill but not the essential apparatus for command and control. Scientists were still only asked for *tools*. No one then dreamt of asking them the question 'How shall we do it?'– to receive the teasing, or baffling, question in response, 'Why do you want to do it at all?' Not until the Second World War did we see the birth of 'operational analysis' and men of the quality of Lindemann, Tizard and Blackett and, later on, in the 1960s, Zuckermann, brought in for the purpose of pure *thinking*.

The application of the behavioural sciences followed exactly the same cycle one war later. 'Psychology' was shrouded with myth and its application blocked by subconscious fears. It was confused with psychiatry, and psychiatrists were concerned with 'mad' people, and, moreover, were soft on discipline. To allow them to participate in leader selection, asking awkward questions about *sex*, was repugnant to many officers and the resistance offered by military commanders to their use was naturally deep and obdurate. Only the insistence of one of the most enlightened men ever to occupy the post of the Adjutant-General of the British Army, General Sir Ronald Adam, overcame these obstacles. Between 1939 and 1945 army psychiatrists, and subsequently psychologists, made the most valuable contributions, quite outside their purely clinical field, to the questions of training, officer selection, 'job-satisfaction' and discipline. Both the Royal Air Force and the United States Air Force made good use of both branches of the science in the field of the effects of stress

and motivation, which hitherto had been dominated by purely moral and unscientific assumptions. By the end of the Second World War we knew a great deal about the nature of leadership on the level of pilots and platoon commanders. But no one so far has had the temerity to apply the same criteria to generals, and this is why I think Norman Dixon's book is by way of being a landmark.

He is a bold man. The subject of generalship is peculiarly the province of military historians of 'classical' outlook, who are perfectly ready to fall on each other, let alone any outsider who may trespass therein, and also of the new wave of social scientists and professors of international relationships and politics whose minds are not necessarily any more open than those of their military colleagues. Norman Dixon is therefore likely to come under a hot fire from several quarters. Fortunately, he is accustomed to heat. As a former regular officer in the Royal Engineers, including nine years in bomb disposal, he was moulded in a corps where intellect habitually meets danger and he has exchanged his old discipline for a new one to become an experimental psychologist. I cannot think of anyone better qualified to attempt this synthesis.

It must be emphasized that his book is neither yet another fashionable attack on British generals, nor one of those fascinating but immature exercises in arranging the heroes of the military pantheon in order of merit, as if picking a world cricket team. Psychologists (he argues) can identify a distinct personality type in whom a fundamental conflict between the dictates of conscience and the need for aggression may seriously interfere with the open-mindedness, imagination and intellect needed to reach correct decisions. Obviously the human personality is far too complex to be represented by a simple stereotype, but Norman Dixon's approach is to use the well-documented 'authoritarian' personality as a template against which to measure some famous commanders.

In my view, at any rate, Norman Dixon's theme does not upset the 'classical' appreciation of the characteristics of a successful general. Surely, he resolves the problem of conflicting qualities: ruthlessness and consideration, relentless pursuit of the aim and flexibility of approach, which so confuse the old-fashioned historian. He speaks, in modern terms, of the 'noise' which the general must filter out from the total input of information he receives in the stress and confusion of battle. But in classical terms, this is old and familiar to us; was it not once said of Massena that 'his mental faculties redoubled amid the roar of cannon'?

I believe that this book should be required reading at all places where future officers are selected, trained or prepared for higher command. Both professional soldiers and the equally useful generation of young academic students of warfare will find new knowledge and valuable insights in this challenging study of how some men in high command may react when under the appalling stresses of war.

SHELFORD BIDWELL

Competence, then, is the free exercise of dexterity and intelligence in the completion of tasks, unimpaired by infantile inferiority.

E. H. ERIKSON, *Youth, Change and Challenge*

With 2,000 years of examples behind us we have no excuse when fighting, for not fighting well.

T. E. LAWRENCE, letter, in Liddell Hart, *Memoirs*

No general ever won a war whose conscience troubled him or who did not want ‘to beat his enemy too much’.

BRIGADIER SHELFORD BIDWELL, *Modern Warfare*

1

Introduction

> '*… We only wish to represent things as they are, and to expose the error of believing that a mere bravo without intellect can make himself distinguished in war.*'
>
> C. VON CXAUSEWTTZ, *On War*

By now most people have become accustomed to, one might almost say blasé about, military incompetence. Like the common cold, flat feet or the British climate, it is accepted as a part of life – faintly ludicrous but quite unavoidable. Surely there can be nothing left to say about the subject.

In fact, military incompetence is a largely preventable, tragically expensive and quite absorbing segment of human behaviour. It also follows certain laws. The first intimation of this came to the writer during desultory reading about notorious military disasters. These moving, often horrific, accounts evoked a curious *déjà vu* experience. For there was something about these apparently senseless goings-on which sent one's thoughts along new channels, making contact with phenomena from quite other, hitherto unrelated, contexts; and then back again to the senseless facts, not now quite so senseless, until gradually a theme, continuous as a hairline crack, could be discerned throughout the stirring tales of derring-do.

If this pattern was real, and meant what it seemed to mean, certain predictions would follow. These were tested

and found correct. Yet other pieces began falling into place, until gradually the mosaic of elements took on the semblance of a theory. This book is about that theory. It is concerned with placing aspects of military behaviour in the context of general psychological principles.

This sounds fine – a cheerful marriage of history and psychology. Unfortunately, however, such a union may not be entirely agreeable to some of the potential in-laws. Judging from the attitude of some historians, a putting together of psychology and history is, to say the least, bad form, while a putting together of psychology and *military* history is positively indecent. There are at least two reasons for this anxiety. The first is that since there are few things more annoying than having one's behaviour *explained*, there exists a natural distaste for explanations of historical figures with whom one perhaps identifies.

The second reason is a distrust of reductionism – of the idea that anything so complex as a military disaster could possibly be *reduced* to explanations in terms of the workings of the human mind, and this by a psychologist (of all people).

In answer one can only say that of course historians know more about history than do psychologists. Of course historical events are determined by a complex set of variables – political, economic, geographical, climatic and sociological. But ultimately history is made by human beings, and whatever other factors may have contributed to a military disaster, one of these was the minds of those who were there, and another the behaviour to which these minds gave rise. Now these are complex variables; hence it *has* been necessary to play down the other factors in order to focus more clearly upon possible psychological determinants. Consider the analogous case of aircraft accidents. Nobody would deny that aeroplanes crash for a number of different reasons, sometimes working independently, sometimes in unison; but this does not mean

that the selecting out for particular study of a single factor, such as metal fatigue, necessitates dwelling on such other variables as bad weather, indifferent navigation, or too much alcohol in the bloodstream of the pilot.

The case for a reductionist approach, however, also rests upon another consideration: namely that the nature of military incompetence and those characteristics which distinguish competent from incompetent senior commanders have shown a significant lack of variation over the years, despite changes in the other factors which shape the course of history. Whether they are well equipped or ill equipped, whether they are in control of men who are armed with spears or men with tanks and rockets, whether they are English, Russian, German, Zulu, American or French, good commanders remain pretty much the same. Likewise, bad commanders have much in common with each other.

One rewarding by-product of writing this book has been the many enjoyable conversations I have had with people in the armed services. Here again, however, a very small minority viewed the enterprise with dismay, as something lacking in taste if not actually bordering on the sacrilegious.[fn1]

To this understandable sensitivity I can only say that no insult is intended. In point of fact, for devotees of the military to take exception to a study of military incompetence is as unjustified as it would be for admirers of teeth to complain about a book on dental caries. In an imperfect world the activities of professional fighters are presumably as necessary to society as those of the police, prostitutes, sewage disposers and psychologists. It is just because we cannot do without these callings (except, possibly, the last) that any serious attempt to understand their peculiarities should be welcomed and, indeed, taken as a compliment. For it is a token of their importance that they should merit such attention. Moreover, it is only by

contemplation of the incompetent that we can appreciate the difficulties and accomplishments of the competent. If there were no incompetent generals it might appear that the direction of armies and the waging of war were easy – tasks well within the compass of all who had the good fortune to reach the highest levels of military organizations.

However, it is not only when contrasted with the inept that great commanders look their best, but also when seen in the context of the organizations to which they belong. The thesis will be developed that the possibility of incompetence springs in large measure from the unfortunate if unavoidable side-effects of creating armies and navies. For the most part these tend to produce a levelling down of human capability, at once encouraging to the mediocre but cramping to the gifted. Viewed in this light, those who have performed brilliantly in the carrying of arms may be considered twice blessed, for they achieved success *despite* the stultifyingly bad features of the organization to which they happened to belong. This alone would seem to justify an unabashed excursion into the realms of military incompetence. But there are additional grounds, if anything more pressing. They concern the related issues of cost and probability.

While few would dispute that the *cost* grows exponentially with the growth of technology, so that the price of wrong decisions must now be reckoned in mega-deaths, the *chance* of military incompetence remains a matter for debate. We might hope that this would be a declining function of better education, more realistic values, greater fear of immeasurably worse consequences, and a decrease in jingoism. But there are strong grounds for taking the pessimistic view that the chance, like the cost, continues to increase with positive acceleration.

Several reasons may be advanced for this depressing hypothesis. Firstly, the gap between the capabilities of the

human mind and the intellectual demands of modern warfare continues that expansion which started in the eighteenth century. It is probably opening from both sides. While modern war becomes increasingly swift and deadly, and the means by which it is waged increasingly complex, the intellectual level of those entering the armed services as officers could well be on the wane. This tentative supposition is based on the fact that fewer and fewer of the young consider the military to be a worthwhile career. One has only to look at contemporary recruiting advertisements to realize the evident difficulties of finding officer-material. They spare nothing in their efforts to convince an unresponsive youth. The services are depicted as glittering toyshops, where handsome young men enjoy themselves with tanks and missiles while basking in the respect of lower ranks hardly less godlike than themselves. In their eagerness to drum up applicants these calls to arms attempt the mental contortion of presenting the services as a classless society in which officers nevertheless remain gentlemen. The clear implication of such expensive pleading can surely be only that the market for a military career is shrinking, to say the least. To meet this fall-off in officer recruitment insufficient has been done, in the writer’s opinion, to improve the real as opposed to the advertised incentive-value of a military career.

Needless to say, a perceived decline in the attractiveness of a military career may actually deter those who might otherwise have opted for one. According to Alexis de Tocqueville, this is particularly so in democratic armies during times of peace. ‘When a military spirit forsakes a people, the profession of arms immediately ceases to be held in honour, and military men fall to the lowest rank of public servants; they are little esteemed and no longer understood … Hence arises a circle of cause and consequence from which it is difficult to escape—the best part of the nation shuns the military profession because

that profession is not honoured, and the profession is not honoured because the best part of the nation has ceased to follow it.'[1]

In short, possibly *less* able people are being called upon to carry out a *more* difficult task with a *heavier* price to pay for error, and at the highest levels their responsibilities are staggering.

In the Vietnam war alone, military commanders were responsible for executing policies which cost the United States 300 billion dollars. They were responsible for releasing thirteen million tons of high explosives (more than six times the weight of bombs dropped by the U.S.A. in all theatres during the whole of the Second World War). They were responsible for the delivery of 90,000 tons of gas and herbicides. And they were responsible for the deaths of between one and two million people. These are great responsibilities. Errors of generalship on this scale would be very costly.

Of course many of the arguments put forward in this book are equally applicable to other human enterprises. Indeed, there is no reason to suppose that incompetence occurs more frequently in military subcultures than it does in politics, commerce or the universities. There are, however, apart from the heavy cost of military disasters, special reasons for studying cases of military ineptitude.

The first is that military organizations may have a particular propensity for attracting a minority of individuals who might prove a menace at high levels of command, and the second is that the nature of militarism serves to accentuate those very traits which may ultimately prove disastrous. In theory, then, errors of generalship could be prevented by attention to these causes.

Thirdly, the public has, at least in the democracies, some real say as to who should make its political decisions. This control does not apply to generals. Even the *worst* government and *most* inept prime minister come up for

possible dismissal every so often. This is not true of armies and navies. We may have the governments we deserve but have sometimes had military minds which we did not.

Fourthly, if one of the main differences between military and political organizations is in the degree of public control, that between the military and commerce lies in decision pay-offs.[fn2] A wrong decision by a company chairman or board of directors may cost a great deal of money and depress a sizeable population of shareholders but military errors have cost hundreds of thousands of lives and untold misery to civilians and soldiers alike.

But the case for a study of military incompetence also rests upon other issues. Not the least of these is the need to examine a view of military behaviour diametrically opposed to, though in its way no less extreme than, that of people who would vehemently defend senior commanders against even the faintest breath of criticism.

This other, hypercritical stance seems remarkably widespread. Thus, for many people with whom the author discussed the central topic of this book the notion of military incompetence struck an immediate and responsive chord. Rejoinders ranged from ‘You’ll have no shortage of data’ to ‘Surely that’s the whole of military history!’.

But when pressed for details there was a tendency to become vague, and retire behind a ‘1066 and All That’ attitude to the subject. Psychological causes were usually reduced to a single factor: low intelligence or, as one historian has put it, the ‘bloody fool theory’ of military history. Doubtless this view has been contributed to by such recent books on military ineptitude as Alan Clark’s *The Donkeys*, an abrasive critique of generals in the First World War. Certainly its title, taken from the famous conversation between Ludendorff and Hoffman[fn3] and such captions as ‘Donkey decorates Lion’ (below a photograph of a general pinning a medal on a lance-corporal), seemed to suggest an equation of incompetence with mulish stupidity. The

contents of the book imply, however, that while stupidity may possibly have played a part, limited intelligence was certainly not the cause of the behaviour for which the generals have been criticized. Judging from the spate of books among which *The Donkeys* appeared, it looked as if a tabu had been lifted on peering into the military woodshed. But, mixing our rural metaphors, the erstwhile sacred cows were once more being transmogrified into nothing more than very unsacred asses. Thus one historian has ascribed a series of military mishaps to 'bone-headed leadership',[2] another spoke of 'the long gallery of military imbecility',[3] while a third has said of British soldiers that 'their fate was decided for them by idiots'.[4] The view taken here is that besides being unkind, these views are probably invalid.

The hypothesis of intellectual incapacity leaves two questions quite unanswered. How, if they are so lacking in intelligence, do people become senior military commanders? And what is it about military organizations that they should attract, promote and ultimately tolerate those whose performance at the highest levels may bring opprobrium upon the organizations which they represent?

To answer these questions, however, it is first necessary to discover what the job of generalship entails and how it could come to be done so badly or so well. This, the bare bones of good and bad generalship, is examined in the next chapter in terms of information theory.

The main part of the book is divided into two halves. The first is concerned with case histories – examples of military ineptitude over a period of some hundred or so years. Much of this material will, no doubt, be all too familiar to the reader. It is included here, and the selections made, with two main purposes in mind – to provide an aide-mémoire, and because it is believed that the common denominators of military incompetence emerge most clearly when looked at in a longitudinal study. One special virtue of this

approach is that it highlights the influence (or, more often, regrettable lack of influence) of earlier upon later events.

For the most part, cases of incompetence have been taken from British military history. Far from being unpatriotic, this apparently one-sided approach springs from a sentimental regard for the forces of the Crown, whose record of valour and fighting ability is second to none, and whose ability to rise above die most intense provocation, either from a civilian population, as in Northern Ireland today, or from the lapses of their top leadership in days gone by, must surely occupy a unique position in the history of warfare. Because it is exceptionally well documented, and has been going on for rather longer than most, British military endeavour also provides a particularly useful datum for a comparative study. Finally, it is surely no more than common courtesy that a critical analysis of one's own 'beams' should take precedence over a listing of the other fellow's 'motes'.

The second half of the book is devoted to discussion and 'explanation'. It is subdivided into two parts, the first concerned with the social psychology of military organizations, and the second with the psychopathology of individual commanders.

The approach here is essentially eclectic. Drawing upon ethological, psycho-analytic and behaviourist theories, it attempts to explain military ineptitude in the light of five inescapable, if unfortunate, features of human psychology. These are:

1. Man shares with lower animals certain powerful instincts.

2. Unlike lower animals, most men learn to control, frustrate, direct and sublimate these instinctual energies.

3. While by far the largest part of this learning occurs in early childhood, its effects upon the adult personality are profound and long-lasting.

4. Residues of this early learning, and in particular unresolved conflicts between infantile desires and the demands of punitive morality, may remain wholly unconscious yet provide a canker of inexhaustible anxiety.

5. When this anxiety becomes the driving force in life's endeavours, the fragile edifices of reason and competence are placed in jeopardy.

In due course we shall examine the scientific basis for these propositions and their relevance to a theory of military incompetence.

Because this is a book about incompetence rather than competence, about disasters rather than successes, these chapters may appear to take an unnecessarily jaundiced view of the military profession and to dwell more upon what is bad rather than what is good in man's attempts to professionalize violence. But without teasing out and enlarging upon the less pleasant features of a multifaceted phenomenon there could be no theory to account for those human aberrations which have caused so much unnecessary suffering in war. As Clausewitz wrote of war, 'This is the way in which the matter must be viewed, and it is to no purpose, it is even against one's better interest, to turn away from the consideration of the real nature of the affair because the horror of its elements excites repugnance.'[5]

To the reader who recoils in disgust from these chapters I can only say that the theory they advance is based upon the emergence of a pattern, of which each small piece may in itself seem trivial, possibly ludicrous, even obnoxious, but which, when put together with other pieces, begins to make sense. This interdependence between the parts necessitates keeping an open mind, and, however much one may dislike or disbelieve the existence of individual trees, postponing judgment until the wood is seen in its entirety.

For the reader who is obsessed with trees, and thinks that history should be left to historians, ideas about soldiering to soldiers, and that psychological theorizing should never go below the belt, this is the moment to stop reading and save yourself some irritation.

[fn1] It is fair to add that certain common characteristics of those civilians and servicemen who took the extreme view provided a very useful clue as to the possible origins of military incompetence.

[fn2] So relatively trivial and unimportant are most academic decisions that it would be arrogant to discuss them in the same breath. But similar principles apply.

[fn3] According to the memoirs of Field-Marshal Von Falkenhayn (cited by Alan Clark), Field-Marshal von Ludendorff's comment 'the English soldiers fight like lions' was greeted by Major-General Max Hoffmann with, 'True, but don't we know they are lions led by donkeys.'

PART ONE

AUTHOR'S NOTE

For a long time attempts to write this book were deterred by what seemed an insurmountable difficulty, that of knowing how to present the raw data. Should they be confined to a table of errors that appeared to recur in military disasters (backed up by an extensive bibliography) or should they be allowed to emerge gradually from long and detailed histories of the events in question? The first approach (when tried) seemed arid, and would have left the average reader with the onerous task of ploughing through a vast amount of military history. The second approach would have meant that this book would have run to several volumes. Faced with this dilemma the writer adopted the uneasy compromise of attempting to precis well-known accounts of military disasters in the pious hope that certain common denominators of these events would become apparent and, no less important, that the discerning reader would acquire a sort of feel for the psychological processes involved.

Since the object of the exercise is not the writing of another military history but rather something more analogous to the detecting of weak signals in a noisy background, these precis are deliberately selective and deliberately superficial in their treatment of surrounding context; for it is only by amplifying the signals and playing down the noise that the pattern (if there is one) comes to light.

Obviously this approach will be anathema to trained historians. They will no doubt raise scholarly eyebrows at flimsy descriptions of momentous battles and deplore the fact that the prolonged agony of the Crimean War, or, say,

Operation Market-Garden should be reduced to a mere handful of ignoble pages.

To them I say skip Part 1 and go to Part 2.

2

Generalship

> ‘*War is the province of uncertainty: three-fourths of those things upon which action in war must be calculated, are hidden more or less in the clouds of great uncertainty*.’
>
> C. VON CLAUSEWITZ, *On War*

> ‘*In a situation where the consequences of wrong decisions are so awesome, where a single bit of irrationality can set a whole train of traumatic events in motion, I do not think that we can be satisfied with the assurance that “most people behave rationally most of the time*”.’
>
> C. E. OSGOOD

WAR IS PRIMARILY concerned with two sorts of activity – the delivering of energy and the communication of information. Most combatants are involved with the former, a few – generals among them – with the latter.

In war, each side is kept busy turning its wealth into energy which is then delivered, free, gratis and for nothing, to the other side. Such energy may be muscular, thermal, kinetic or chemical. Wars are only possible because the recipients of this energy are ill prepared to receive it and convert it into a useful form for their own economy. If, by means of, say, impossibly large funnels and gigantic reservoirs, they could capture and store the energy flung at them by the other side, the recipients of this unsolicited gift would soon be so rich, and the other side so poor, that