

line they were delighted to find they had suffered only 90 casualties. Their euphoria was shortlived, for a second count revealed that 'by a mere oversight' 600 British soldiers had been left behind on the enemy-held hills. Since nobody had told them to retreat, they became prisoners of the Boers. As for other blunders by senior commanders in this and other wars, a cover story was soon put out to preserve the general's reputation. On this occasion Gatacre had been 'treacherously led into an ambush'.

In mitigation it might be claimed that since attack is more difficult than defence men like Methuen and Gatacre were disadvantaged in their conflict with an enemy who were, after all, defending their own terrain against an invading army. Two points, however, deserve to be made. Firstly, British Army training up to that time had always laid great stress on attack, with an almost total neglect of defensive tactics. As we shall see, there are good psychological reasons for this one-sided preparation for war, a bias in training for which this country paid dearly in subsequent conflicts. In the Boer War the Army was doing what it had been trained for. The other point is this. While in the battles so far described British troops were on the offensive, there were other military events in which they occupied a defensive role, as for example in the sieges of Ladysmith and Mafeking.

This makes it possible to examine the suggestion that military incompetence was confined to the handling of offensive rather than defensive actions. When we do so, however, the hypothesis is found untenable. Even in defence, incompetence still reigned. The best example is that afforded by Sir George White, V.C., Commander-in-Chief Natal, who, in trying to resist the enemy, failed to carry out the most elementary precautions. Like some deranged householder who refuses to lock his door when he knows burglars are about, White omitted to carry out any measures to deny the Boers use of their most valuable mode of access—the railway. He failed to mine passes, block tunnels, blow up bridges, or in any way destroy their prime means of transportation. Of this serious dereliction, *The Times History* comments: 'The least damaging explanation is that Sir George White never realized fully that the Boers were civilized opponents who could make use of a railway for military purposes.\*'

\* Sir George White, whose statue can be seen near Broadcasting House in London, was subsequently made a field-marshal and Companion of Honour (against the advice of A. J. Balfour).

As we shall see, there are remarkable parallels between this lapse and the events which preceded the fall of Singapore in 1942. In both cases the generals in charge were responsible for the safety of an English civilian population. In both cases they seriously underestimated the ability of the enemy, and this in the face of overwhelming evidence. And in both cases they lacked the imagination to carry out the most elementary and obvious of precautions.\* In short, the argument that they failed to be efficient only because of the difficulties attending attack scarcely holds water.

It is at this point that it becomes necessary to introduce another concept which is relevant to the conduct of the South African War. It is that of the effects of psychological stress upon decision-making. It is perhaps in their resistance to stress, in their ability to carry on when things go wrong, that good generals are most easily distinguished from poor ones.

By this standard General Buller, physically so huge, failed dismally. Irresolute from the outset, the three defeats at Magersfontein, Stormberg Junction and Colenso sapped whatever confidence he ever had. From being weak and fearful he became a veritable jelly of indecision. His plans became vague and indefinite, and his specific orders scarcely more enlightening. His lack of moral courage in the face of adversity revealed itself most clearly in his propensity for making scapegoats of his unfortunate subordinates, those admittedly incompetent generals who had blundered on without direction or assistance from above, while taking none of the blame himself. 'Nothing in his despatches at the time, or later in his evidence before the Royal Commission [convened to investigate the reasons for the series of defeats] suggests that, even in the most roundabout way, he who planned the whole [campaign] was in any manner responsible for its failure. The nearest he came to such an admission was a reference to "bad luck".'

Bad luck it may have been, but worse luck was to follow in the shape of that 1,400-foot monument to military ineptitude, Spion Kop. The totally unnecessary storming of this mini-mountain was to the Boer War what the charge of the Light Brigade had been to the Crimean War. The details are as follows. While still numbed by the series of

\* The fact that in the case of Singapore even greater errors of judgment had been made by politicians and Army leaders before the war is immaterial to this argument.



defeats just recounted, Buller's army of 29,000 infantry, 2,600 mounted men, 8 field batteries and 10 naval guns was enriched, if that is the word, by the arrival of a fresh division commanded by Sir Charles Warren, R.E. Together these two forces, under the supreme command of Buller, were employed to try and lift the siege of Ladysmith. Unfortunately, and despite their immense superiority in men and equipment, they failed to do so.

So far as the British were concerned, the operation involved crossing the river Tugela and then closing on Ladysmith via a complex of small hills and ranges of high ground. There were two places at which the river could be forded. Buller ordered Warren to lead the assault across one of these 'drifts', while another force, under another general, Lyttleton, created a diversionary crossing at the other. For success, the plan depended upon speed of movement, surprise and synchronizing the two crossings. Ideally, Warren and his force, on the left flank, should have been over the river and well on their way to Ladysmith while Lyttleton was still occupying the Boers' attention on the right flank.

The plan went wrong for several reasons. In the first place Warren's division was far too small for the main attack. As to why Buller should have used an attacking force whose size, in comparison with the total number of troops he had available, constituted a mere pinprick, it suffices to note that it accorded with his general policy of avoiding any direct responsibility for whatever might transpire. If the worst happened it would be Warren's army, not his, that would carry the blame. In due course we shall examine two deeper reasons for this particular form of military incompetence.

The second reason for disaster lay in the character of Warren, who has been described as 'dilatatory yet fidgety, over-cautious yet irresolute and totally ignorant regarding the use of cavalry'. He was also obsessive, obstinate, self-opinionated and excessively bad-tempered.

While Lyttleton crossed the Tugela with his diversionary force and successfully convinced the Boers that this was Buller's line of advance, Warren failed to exploit the situation. Instead of crossing the river with all speed he seemed 'to give way to certain fads and fancies'. These included an obsession with his enormous baggage train\* and the fear

\* One of the factors which slowed up Buller's military movement in the Boer War was the quantity of the baggage with which officers went on active service. According to Kruger this might well include pianos, long-horned gramophones,

that it might be destroyed by non-existent enemy guns on the small mountain Spion Kop. So concerned was he with his baggage that he spent twenty-six hours personally supervising its transfer across the river. The delay was invaluable to the Boers.

It was at this point that mere tardiness and inefficiency gave way to something more approaching madness. Under the mounting strain of inactivity a curious *folie à deux* seemed to descend upon Buller and his subordinate. In chronological order the events were as follows:

1. A cavalry reconnoitre by Lord Dundonald of the territory beyond the river revealed an obvious line of advance for Warren's army.

2. Warren was furious that Dundonald should have used his cavalry to make the *recce*.

3. Partly through his obsession with the baggage train and partly because of the unsolicited and unwelcome information from Dundonald, Warren rejected the projected movement and opted instead for a direct advance across the Tabanyama range, directly to his front. Unfortunately no *recce* had been made of this area.

4. It was at this point that Buller began describing Warren's behaviour as 'aimless and irresolute'. Nevertheless, he still refused to assume command.

5. Warren's assault on the Tabanyama range was hardly a success. This was because he found the Boers well dug in on a second crest of whose existence he had been ignorant. He still refused to outflank the Boer positions.

6. Buller, who was becoming increasingly restless, rode over to proffer criticism and advice. He still refrained from giving any orders to Warren.

7. Warren's eye now lit upon the cone-shaped eminence of Spion Kop. He knew instantly that it must be captured. Buller readily agreed, and this though neither general had previously considered such a course of action, let alone worked out what it would entail.

8. The job of attacking what has been called 'an unknown mountain on a dark night against a determined enemy of unknown strength' was given to General Talbot-Coke. His 'qualifications' for the venture

chests of drawers, polo sticks, and in Buller's case an iron bathroom and well-equipped kitchen.



were that he had only just arrived and was seriously affected by a game leg. At least he was no more ignorant of Spion Kop than were any of his colleagues, for they knew nothing about its summit—its extent or suitability for defence. No one wondered why the Boers had no guns up there, nor did it occur to anyone that the Boers might resent its occupation by the British. Hence no diversionary tactics were employed.

And so, while the generals stayed below, the men were ordered up the steeply sloping mountainside, into a fog hardly less dense than that which clouded the minds of their commanders. When, in almost zero visibility, they thought they had reached the summit, the assault force halted, congratulated themselves on the total absence of opposition, raised the Union Jack and tried to entrench. The operative word is 'tried', for the top was much like the rest of the mountain, solid rock. Nobody had warned them of this. They decided to use sandbags, only to find that no one had remembered to bring them. While the mists cleared they did the best they could with pieces of rock and clods of earth, only too well aware that this flimsy protection provided no head cover whatsoever.

If this gave them food for thought there was more to follow, for with a further improvement in visibility they made a second disquieting discovery. They were not where they thought they were. Instead of the summit they found themselves on a small plateau some way below the mountain top: 1,700 men on a piece of ground 400 x 500 yards, and above them, on three sides, the Boers. The enemy opened fire. Within minutes the ground was littered with corpses, many with bullet-holes in the side of the head or body. Owing to the lack of head cover the losses from shrapnel were even greater. Trapped in this seemingly hopeless position without any guidance or directives from their general, two hundred Lancashire Fusiliers laid down their arms and surrendered to the Boers. Their place was taken by reinforcements sent up from below.

Meanwhile Warren and Buller did nothing to help the hard-pressed troops. No doubt appalled by what was happening to his army on the heights above, Warren, supine at the best of times, went into a state that has been described as paralytic. Only once did he try to interfere with the course of events. This was to stop his battery of naval guns from shelling Boer positions on a neighbouring peak. He did so in the mistaken belief that the troops they were shelling were British.

Although possessing the necessary equipment, he had failed to establish telegraphic communication with his troops on Spion Kop. Had he done so this particular costly error would never have occurred.

As to why he, the commanding general, should deliberately cut himself off from the main source of intelligence, his own front-line troops, one can only surmise that, at some level, he just did not want to know. This hypothesis, that Warren was using what is technically known as the mechanism of denial, receives support from another curious incident. A war correspondent who had witnessed the dire events on the top of the mountain hurried down to the commanding general. But instead of receiving this, admittedly unsolicited, information with gratitude, Warren flew into a rage and demanded that the journalist should be arrested for insolence. The war correspondent in question was Winston Churchill.

But Warren's behaviour, as we have said, was only part of a *folie à deux*. No less extraordinary was that of his commander-in-chief. Buller's contribution was violently to resist the pleas of his subordinate commanders for an attack upon those positions from which the Boers were so assiduously shelling his troops. He even went so far as to recall such units as had managed to reach peaks held by the enemy. Had they been allowed to remain, the massacre of British troops would have been substantially reduced.

When night came, those who had survived the constant shelling and rifle fire decided to seek permission to withdraw. Unfortunately their lines of communication were again disrupted, this time because they had not been given sufficient oil for their signalling lamps. Maintaining communications within his army was not Warren's strongest suit. He did, however, order General Talbot-Coke to go up the mountain and bring back news. But once again he took great pains to avoid hearing the worst. For a start, he selected as his messenger a lame man who did not know the country; then, just in case he did succeed in struggling up and down the mountain, Warren took the ultimate precaution of shifting his H.Q. to a new location. Since he did this in Talbot-Coke's absence, and without a word to anyone, he managed to sustain his ignorance.

So ended the battle. Having lost 243 dead and 100 wounded, the army withdrew. The following day found 20,000 sullen men marching back the way they had come. For all their superiority in numbers, for all their training on the drill squares of Aldershot, they had achieved



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of pontification. 'I have never forgotten the trouble I got into for contradicting a general who announced that sodomy had rotted the Roman Empire; the fact that this officer scarcely knew a word of Latin and by his own confession had never read a line of Gibbon was held to be irrelevant.'<sup>16</sup>

Rather more serious are those pontifications which aim to make nasty facts go away by the magical process of emitting loud noises in the opposite direction. Here are some utterances of this kind.

Field-Marshal Montgomery-Massingberd, Chief of the Imperial General Staff from 1926 to 1933: 'There are certain critics in the press who say we should organize the Army again for a war in Europe ... the Army is not likely to be used for a big war in Europe for many years to come.'

Sir Ronald Charles, Master General of Ordnance: 'There is no likelihood of war in our lifetime.' This was said at the time of Hitler's accession to power. And, also before the last war, Sir Hugh Elles, Director of Military Training: 'The Japanese are no danger to us and eager for our friendship.'

In a calling where the accuracy of a communication may be a matter of life or death, the predisposition to pontificate is a dangerous liability. Unfortunately such a predisposition will be strongest in those like headmasters, judges, prison governors and senior military commanders who for too long have been in a position to lord it over their fellow men. Unfortunately such a predisposition will also be strongest in authoritarian organizations where the preservation of apparent omniscience by those above may be deemed of more importance than the truth.\*

But the important thing about pontification is that though an intellectual exercise its origins are emotional.

Closely allied to pontification and no less hazardous is 'cognitive dissonance'. This uncomfortable mental state arises when a person possesses knowledge or beliefs which conflict with a decision he has made. The following hypothetical situation should make the matter plain. A heavy smoker experiences dissonance because the knowledge that he smokes is inconsistent with the knowledge that smoking causes cancer. Since he finds it impossible to give up cigarettes, he tries to reduce dissonance (i.e. tip the balance towards peace of mind) by con-

\* According to research by Chaubey, fear of failure increases after middle age.<sup>17</sup>

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centrating on justifications for smoking and ignoring evidence for its risks. He may tell himself that the revenue from tobacco helps the Government (i.e. he is therefore being patriotic), that it helps keep his weight down and that it is a manly, sociable habit. At the same time he may well refrain from reading the latest report on the relationship between smoking and lung cancer. If on the other hand he cannot avoid being confronted by tiresome statistics, he may well strive to reduce dissonance by telling himself (and others) that the correlation between smoking and cancer could just as well be taken to signify that people who are going to get cancer anyway tend to smoke in order to ward off the disease.

Since it was first propounded by Festinger in 1957, Dissonance Theory has given rise to a large number of empirical studies. Though the precise nature of the underlying psychological processes is far from clear, there are certain conclusions which could have serious implications for military decision-making. They may be summarized by saying that: 'Once the decision has been made and the person is committed to a given course of action, the psychological situation changes decisively. There is less emphasis on objectivity and there is more partiality and bias in the way in which the person views and evaluates the alternatives.'<sup>18</sup>

In other words, decision-making may well be followed by a period of mental activity that could be described as at the very least somewhat one-sided.

Since the extent of dissonance experienced is a function of the importance of the decision made, it is likely that many military decisions eventuate in fairly severe forms of mental disquiet. But a military commander cannot afford to reduce dissonance when this involves closing his mind to or 'reinterpreting' unpalatable information. The dire consequences that might follow such an attempt were only too evident after the Cambrai offensive and again during Townshend's advance on Ctesiphon. In both instances the ostrich-like behaviour of senior officers cost the Army dear.\* The same may be said of the Ardennes counter-attack in 1944 and of Montgomery's failure, in the light of subsequent intelligence reports, to think twice about his decision to capture the bridge at Arnhem.

While the costs of dissonance resolution by some military men may be inordinately high, the probability of these costs occurring is also

\* Byng in the first instance and Nixon in the second.



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very high. There are three reasons. In the first place, military decisions are very often irrevocable. Secondly, they involve large pay-offs—much hangs on their outcome, *including the reputation of the decision-maker*. Finally, those commanders with weak egos, with over-strong needs for approval and the most closed minds will be the very ones least able to tolerate the nagging doubts of cognitive dissonance. In other words it will be the *least* rational who are the *most* likely to reduce dissonance by ignoring unpalatable intelligence. Research on individual differences in cognitive dissonance suggests that its effects are likely to be strongest in those afflicted with chronic low self-esteem and general passivity.<sup>19</sup>

More recent research on cognitive dissonance has emphasized another variable of some consequence for military behaviour: the degree of justification for the initial decision. Experiments by Zimbardo and others have shown that the less justified a decision, the greater will be the dissonance and therefore the more vigorous its resolution. No better example is afforded than that of Townshend's occupation of Kut. Since his advance up the Tigris was totally unjustified by facts of which he was fully aware, his dissonance, when disaster struck, must have been extreme and, to a man of his egotistical nature, demanding of instant resolution. So, again in the face of much contrary evidence, he withdrew into Kut. The wiser and possible course of retreating to Basra would have been a greater admission of the lack of justification for his previous decision. By the same token, once inside Kut nothing would budge him, because to break out, even to assist those who had been sent to release him, would have emphasized his lack of justification for being there in the first place. In short, an inability to admit one has been in the wrong will be greater the more wrong one has been, and the more wrong one has been the more bizarre will be subsequent attempts to justify the unjustifiable.

We can see now the relationship between pontification and cognitive dissonance. Pontification is one of the ways in which people try to resolve their dissonance. By loudly asserting what is consistent with some decision they have made and ignoring what is contrary they can reduce their dissonance. Clearly this particular concatenation of intellectual processes may prove very hazardous in a military context.

But there is another aspect of decision-making no less hazardous—its 'riskiness'. Recent research has shown that people vary in the degree to which they adjust the riskiness of their decisions to the realities of the

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external situation.<sup>20</sup> Individuals who become anxious under conditions of stress, or who are prone to be defensive and deny anything that threatens their self-esteem, tend to be bad at judging whether the risks they take, or the caution they display, are justified by the possible outcomes of their decisions. For example, they might well adopt the same degree of caution whether placing a small bet, getting married or starting a nuclear war. There is a sad irony about this state of affairs, for it means that those people who are most sensitive to the success or failure of a decision will be the very ones who make the biggest mistakes. Conversely, less anxious individuals will act more rationally because able to devote greater attention to the realities with which they are confronted.

Obviously these findings have considerable and alarming implications for the military scene. For as one psychologist has said: 'Under stress men are more likely to act irrationally, to strike out blindly, or even to freeze into stupid immobility.'<sup>21</sup> Others have remarked: 'The presence of relatively high levels of rationality in decision-making may characterize but a minority of men ... we are burdened by a nagging curiosity about how those persons controlling our destiny would distribute themselves within the personality-groups outlined.'<sup>22</sup> But why should anxious and defensive individuals, those who have the most to lose, act more irrationally than those less afflicted by neurosis? Two reasons have been advanced. The first has been well stated by Deutsch: 'Nervousness, the need to respond quickly because of the fear that one will lose either the desire or ability to respond, enhances the likelihood that a response will be triggered off by an insufficient stimulus, and thus makes for instability.'<sup>23</sup>

The second reason why a proportion of people will make irrational decisions whose riskiness is unrelated to reality is because, being neurotic, they will strive to maintain an image of themselves as either 'bold and daring' or as 'careful and judicious decision-makers', and the urge to sustain their particular conceit will take precedence over the need to behave realistically. Townshend's risky bid to capture Baghdad is consistent with this principle.

This chapter started with the intention of examining the oldest theory of military incompetence: namely that inept decisions occur through intellectual disabilities. The simplest form of this theory is that some military commanders (like some psychologists) are just plain stupid and that their faulty decisions spring from lowly intelligence.



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Since decision-making is, by definition, a cognitive process then obviously the oldest theory is in one sense a truism, but it by no means follows that the simple hypothesis of low intelligence fits the bill. On the contrary, by looking further into the nature of decision-processes we are compelled to entertain another rather different possibility: namely, that the apparent intellectual failings of some military commanders are due not to lack of intelligence but to their feelings. Cognitive dissonance, pontification, denial, risk-taking and anti-intellectualism are all, in reality, more concerned with emotion than with intelligence. The susceptibility to cognitive dissonance, the tendency to pontificate and the inability to adjust the riskiness of decisions to the real situation are a product of such neurotic disabilities as extreme anxiety under stress, low self-esteem, nervousness, the need for approval and general defensiveness. These, it seems, over and above his level of intelligence, are the factors which interfere with what a man decides to do in a given situation.

## 15

### Military Organizations

*'Everything is very simple in war, but the simplest thing is very difficult. These difficulties accumulate and produce a friction which no man can imagine exactly who has not seen war.'*

C. VON CLAUSEWITZ, *On War*

Military organizations make for military incompetence in two ways — directly, by forcing their members to act in a fashion that is not always conducive to military success, and indirectly, by attracting, selecting and promoting a minority of people with particular defects of intellect and personality.

The root-cause of all this is that since men are not by nature all that well equipped for aggression on a grand scale, they have had to develop a complex of rules, conventions and ways of thinking which, in the course of time, ossify into outmoded tradition, curious ritual, inappropriate dogma and that bane of some military organizations, irrelevant 'bullshit'. We are talking of 'militarism', a sub-culture which, in the end, may well hamper rather than facilitate warring behaviour. Three factors contribute to its growth. The first is that the origins of fighting are instinctive—so-called intra-species aggression. The second is that fighting was originally more a trial of strength than of wits. And the third that it is something which, in its original form, many lower species can do rather better than we can. Let us consider these points in a little more detail.

Broadly speaking, human activities may be regarded as falling into one or the other of two main groups: those which are directly instinctual and those which are not. Into the first, which involves what have been succinctly described as the 'three Fs'—feeding, fighting and