

Field Marshal Lord Harding of Petherton (1896-1989)

Lord Harding prepared the following autobiographical notes in instalments in 1974, which he sent to Hanna Nicholas

ASSORTED ARTICLES, LETTERS, EXTRACTS:

LONDON CALLING JUNE 16, 1955: FIELD MARSHAL SIR JOHN HARDING by LT GENERAL SIR BRIAN HORROCKS

"I first met John Harding during the battle of Alamein when he was commanding the 7th Armoured Division in my Corps - 13 corps. Our job was to try to keep the German reserves down in the south for as long as possible, while the main punch was made by 30 Corps on our right. The 7th Armoured Division had had a very bad night doing their best to penetrate some deep enemy mine-fields. When I went down to see them in the morning their tanks, scattered over a wide area of desert, were being consistently shelled by German and Italian guns.

As I approached, a small stocky figure climbed out of the turret of his tank and strolled across to greet me. It was John Harding, fresh, alert, confident and with a complete grasp of the whole tactical situation; he might well have been taking part in a squadron exercise on Salisbury Plain. He was a first-class armoured commander, always well forward in the battle and almost frighteningly regardless of his own safety. And, mind you, to be an armoured commander in Egypt was the supreme test, because in the desert the tank was the queen of the battlefield.

Harding would undoubtedly say, even today, when he has reached the highest pinnacle which the Army has to offer, that he enjoyed his time in command of the "Desert Rats" more than anything that has come his way either before or since. During his time in the desert he was awarded the DSO and two Bars within thirteen months - pretty good going. Still, to have been a successful commander does not necessarily qualify an officer automatically for the highest post in the British Army. Divisional commanders are many, but there is only one Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

Nevertheless, none of us were surprised when the Prime Minister selected Harding for this high office as he was undoubtedly the outstanding figure of what might be described as the post-war vintage. In fact, it almost seemed as though some kindly fairy had been directing Harding's whole life with this one supreme goal in view. For few generals have held such a variety of command and staff appointments all over the world.

But let me go back to the beginning. As befits a man of West Country Yeoman stock, Harding prefers the country to the town. But his father, a solicitor's clerk in Somerset, could not provide the capital to set his son up as a farmer. So in 1912, at sixteen years of age, the reluctant young Harding found himself in London with the job of clerk in the Post Office Savings Bank. Surely a somewhat obscure, unusual approach to his present elevated position.

But May, 1914, marked the most important milestone from the Army's point of view, for it was then that his name appeared for the first time in the Army list as 2nd Lieutenant Harding of the Finsbury Rifles, Territorial Army, and he gained his first experience of active service as a platoon commander in this battalion at Gallipoli in August 1915. Here he got bitten with soldiering, and in 1917 he was given a regular commission in his county regiment, the Somerset Light Infantry.

As a result of these four years of active service in the front line, Harding acquired a deep understanding of the problems which face regimental officers and men in battle. He has never forgotten his regimental experience, and although perfectly capable of "planning" at the highest level he never became a theorist. This is particularly important today when the Army has reached such an important cross-roads in its development. Behind lie the well-trying

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organisations and methods with which we won the last war. In front is a comparatively unknown territory dominated by tactical nuclear missiles of all sorts.

How fortunate that at this time of all others we have a CIGS who is, above all, a first-rate practical soldier. And who knows just what is and what is not possible in warfare. Throughout the maze of controversy which has raged about the shape of our future army Harding has always been quite clear that he wants a streamlined Army based on highly trained, tough, mobile battle-groups, prepared to live hard. The fact that he started life in the Territorial Army is also an asset in these days when our reserve Army consists very largely of Territorial divisions; Harding is no stranger to the problems which beset the part-time soldier.

Between the wars he led the normal life of a young regular officer, advancing slowly up the promotion ladder, attending the Staff College and alternating between regimental and staff employment. But in 1934 fate stepped in again, and he was appointed Brigade Major of the British Brigade with the International Force during the Saar Plebiscite. It was here that his education in international relations began.

During the second world war he showed himself to be that rare bird: a first-class staff officer who was also a good commander. For fifteen months, as Brigadier, General Staff, he was the guiding genius of the Western Desert Force, which later became 30 Corps. Corps commanders came and Corps commanders departed, but John Harding seemingly went on forever. Eventually he got his reward for months of selfless work by being appointed to command the famous 7th Armoured Division just before the battle of Alamein. Then, apparent all set for rapid advancement as a commander, he was severely wounded just short of Tripoli. As a result he was left with a badly maimed hand and was out of action for nine months.

This seeming setback was in reality a blessing in disguise, for had he not been wounded he would soon have been promoted to command a Corps and might quite likely never have become Chief of Staff to Field Marshal Alexander's 15th Army Group in Italy. He would thus have missed the most valuable experience of his whole career, because the armies which fought in Italy were composed of troops from many nations, and it was then that Harding developed his genius for co-operation. Today there is not general officer in our Army who is more popular with our Allies and with the Dominions, or in whom Allied commanders have such complete confidence. And if there is one lesson more than any other which has emerged during these post-war years it is that no army and no nation can "go it alone". All over Europe are NATO military headquarters consisting of commanders and staff officers from many different countries working together in complete harmony.

After making a success in this gruelling staff appointment, in 1945 he was promoted to command 13 Corps, and was responsible for the final drive to Trieste. Now with this war record behind him it is not surprising that the Army thinks highly of Harding; but other generals have equally distinguished careers and yet few have achieved his popularity. The answer lies in his complete modesty, simplicity and obvious integrity.

The war over, in 1946 he was appointed Commander-in-Chief, Central Mediterranean Forces. Then for one year, as C-in-C Far East Land Forces, he grappled with the thorny problems of Korea, Malaya, and Pacific defence. Finally, his genius for co-operation came into full play when, for the last year before taking up his present post he was C-in-C British Army of the Rhine. It was thanks largely to his drive and determination that the Northern Army Group was welded into an inter-Allied team.

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That Sir John Harding is a master of his own craft, the Army, there can obviously be no doubt at all, but the CIGS, like many people today, wears two hats. After fighting the Army's own battle from his office in the War Office he must step over the way to a meeting of the Chiefs of Staff, forget his parochial army outlook, and consider the problem from the wider aspect of national defence. Now I have no doubt that behind closed doors the three Chiefs of Staff have many fierce arguments, but to the world outside they present a united front. Indeed, when Field Marshal Montgomery during a recent lecture at the Royal United Services Institute suggested that co-ordination between the three services could be improved Sir John Harding was the first man to stand up and contradict his old chief.

Many of us thought that Harding's main difficulty would lie in the political field. He was a stranger to the ways of Whitehall, and no doubt like many generals had a deep-rooted mistrust of all politicians. In all probability during his early days as CIGS he found the battle of Whitehall a hard one, but it has been interesting to note how his influence with our political leaders has steadily increased. The other day one of our most senior and experienced Ministers said to me: "I honestly believe that Harding is one of the best CIGS the British Army has ever had".

(Broadcast in the BBC's General Overseas Service)".