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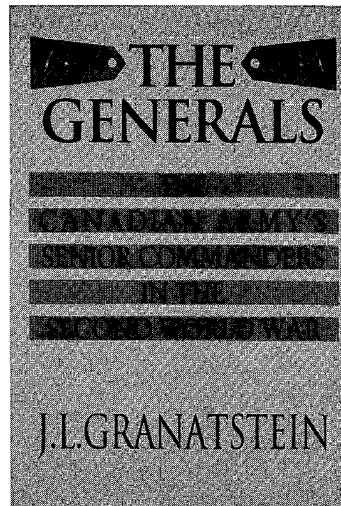
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Hoffmeister in Italy

J.L. Granatstein

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Chris Vokes, commanding the 1st Canadian Infantry Division's 2 Brigade in which the Seaforth Highlanders served, had heard about Major B.M. Hoffmeister. "There is no such thing as a born soldier," Vokes was told, "but he is the next best thing to it. He takes to soldiering like a duck to water." Vokes wanted Hoffmeister to take over the Seaforths, and he had arranged it.¹ The regiment was not in good shape when Hoffmeister returned from the Canadian Junior War Staff course in Kingston, Ontario, in October 1942. Vokes told him it was now the worst battalion of the three in the brigade, and he wanted them to be the best.² There were problems with some of the senior officers, morale and discipline had slipped among the rank and file and, Hoffmeister believed, "damned bad leadership and administration" were to blame. He stepped in, made changes in personnel, began to send officers and NCOs on courses, and stepped up the pace of training. Morale improved dramatically, proving the adage that troops who are worked hardest are happiest. And his brigade and division commanders thought highly of Hoffmeister. Major-General Harry Salmon, the General Officer Commanding (GOC), recommended him for promotion (though ranking him fourth on a list of four behind Foulkes, Vokes and Kitching),



citing his "ability to think clearly and quickly. Good leadership qualities. Will make a good G staff [operations] officer and with more experience a bde. comd."³ Staff College had prepared Hoffmeister for battle, and when the 1st Division was detailed for the operations in Sicily, Hoffy's men, for so the Seaforths now thought of themselves, were ready.

Aboard ship en route to the Mediterranean, the CO assured that he went to each and every platoon in the regiment to brief them on the coming assault. As Hoffmeister said, they were his friends — he used to row in Vancouver with one of the sergeants, for example. And while he knew other battalion commanders didn't do this kind of all ranks' briefing, he cherished the thought that the men looked on him as a friend. Of course, that would require him to stick his neck out in action, to show himself, or else morale would fall. But he was prepared for this because he realized that unless he understood the conditions the soldiers had to face, the Seaforths' confidence in him could waver. A man of powerful personality and striking magnetism, Hoffmeister was the classic leader, someone that men wanted to follow. In all likelihood, they would have followed him if he had not briefed them so well; taken into his



Major General B.M. Hoffmeister briefing officers of the 5th Canadian Armoured Division prior to the advance on the Hitler Line, 13 May 1944.

(Photo by Strathy Smith/NAC PA 189922)

confidence, however, knowing his mind and their place in the plans, the Seaforths were ready for anything. There was nothing new in this Hoffmeister approach, nothing innovative. His was the classic technique of “man management” as taught to officers, the approved method of securing the “willing compliance” necessary to make soldiers risk their lives; unfortunately, it was all too often neglected by less conscientious and less sensible officers.

The worth of Hoffmeister’s approach was shown in action. The Seaforths fought their way through the rugged countryside with “fire, movement and plenty of guts,” taking casualties but learning quickly and besting the Germans. Hoffmeister himself narrowly escaped death near Leonforte when four Canadian artillery shells fell short and exploded near the spot he was giving his orders on 21 July 1943. There

were 30 casualties, but Hoffmeister escaped unscathed, though severely shaken.⁴ The next month, Hoffmeister led his regiment in a succession of attacks against Nazi positions north of the Salso River. The attack on the enemy’s 3rd Parachute Regiment north of Carcaci on 5 August, staged in conjunction with tanks of the Three Rivers Regiment, was deemed “a model infantry-cum-tank action” by Major-General Guy Simonds, the GOC, who watched the battle from a vantage point on a nearby hilltop. So it was, for Hoffmeister rode in the armoured regiment commander’s tank and thus kept control of the action. The paras fought “to the last man and the last round,” and the Seaforths in this one action lost 11 killed and 32 wounded.⁵

Hoffmeister and his regiment had proven themselves in action. Simonds, however, was not Hoffmeister’s favourite commander, then or later. The GOC’s concept of man management was not Hoffmeister’s. Simonds was too cold-blooded. His orders were issued in an abrupt manner, his plans being snapped out, the session ending in a way that almost forbade comment. Simonds offered few pats on the back and, in Hoffmeister’s view, made no effort to see or understand the problems of the battalion commander and his men.⁶

And his initiation to battle in Sicily had confirmed Hoffmeister in his view of Permanent Force (PF) officers. They were often too old and too fat and some drank too much, he said. The PF “protective net” that surrounded them could sometimes be hard to take. One brigadier, in whom he had no confidence, would later be forced upon him, the Canadian corps commander telling Hoffmeister, by then a division commander, that he was a PFER and had to be given his chance. There was also pressure to award decorations to PF senior officers who, he believed, did not deserve them.⁷

Hoffmeister merited his decorations, and he won the first of his three DSOs in Sicily. (There was an apocryphal story that his batman was recommended for the Victoria Cross simply for following Hoffmeister around!) It was not long before he was promoted to brigadier. On 1 November 1943, the 1st Canadian Infantry Division now fighting on the Italian mainland,

Vokes became a major-general and GOC in place of Simonds who took the 5th Canadian Armoured Division, then en route to Italy. To replace Vokes, Hoffmeister got the nod. He had been recommended by Simonds and General Bernard Montgomery, the Eighth Army commander, for a brigade command in September and, though the initial intent back at Canadian Military Headquarters (CMHQ) in London was to give him a brigade in Britain, the First Canadian Army's GOC-in-C, General A.G.L. McNaughton, decided he should have 2 Brigade in 1st Division.⁸

In fact, Hoffmeister was already an acting brigadier, filling in for Vokes who had temporarily replaced Simonds on 29 September when the GOC was evacuated with jaundice. Vokes had found Hoffmeister at a brigade sports meet at Potenza and told him he was promoted. Following the same philosophy he had adopted more than two years before, Hoffmeister simply said "that's fine, I'll turn over [command of the Seaforths] immediately, pack up my stuff and be at your headquarters within an hour."⁹

Hoffmeister's initiation during the rapid advance of the division in the early days of the campaign on the mainland was not without its moments. His headquarters had lost touch with one of his battalions, the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, and Hoffmeister and another officer drove forward to find them. "I couldn't see or hear a sound around any place. . . . Suddenly I looked over my shoulder and there was a German position up on a hill, an O[bservation] P[ost] obviously manned by four or five people. In those days," he went on, "I carried a rifle and tried to look like a private soldier," a sensible way of not being singled out by the enemy. Then Hoffmeister spotted a line of panzers, found some of his missing Patricias, and used their wireless to call up his own armour. Getting away soon turned into a series of mad dashes as he and the other officer took turns running and going to ground, chased by tank gunfire. "I saw the Patricias the next day," Hoffmeister's companion on this adventure wrote later, "and heard how they sat up on the hill and laughed at the spectacle of the Brigade Commander . . . doing hundred yard dashes between the shellbursts. . . ." ¹⁰

If that affair had its slightly comic side, the battle for Ortona around Christmas 1943 had none. A small fishing port on the Adriatic about halfway up the Italian peninsula, Ortona had little strategic significance in and of itself, but it was strongly held by the Germans and the Canadians had been ordered to take the town. To advance from the Mara River, 5 kms south of Ortona, to the Riccio River, 4 kms north of the town, took a month and cost heavily in casualties — 253 officers and 3,703 men by the GOC's estimate at the time¹¹ — or almost half the fighting strength of the Division's infantry when the battle began in the second week of December 1943.

For Hoffmeister's 2 Brigade, orders to take Ortona were orders. In his recollection, as in that of everyone who was there, it was "a desperate struggle" even to reach the town, so strongly were the rugged approaches defended; then the battle in Ortona itself involved the troops in house-to-house fighting as they mouseholed their way from one connected dwelling into the next. So vicious was the battle that Vokes, alarmed at the decimation of his infantry, asked Hoffmeister if he wanted to quit. By this time, the Brigadier believed that his troops were making progress against the German paratroopers and said "absolutely not, to quit at this time would be letting the brigade down and the effect on the morale of the brigade would be such that it would be just shocking."¹² That may have been true, though the impact of the slaughter at Ortona left the bruised survivors reeling. Moreover, perhaps Vokes' tactics were not appropriate, some historians commenting that the division's attacks faltered because they lacked weight, often being launched by single battalions. The terrain also could have lent itself to the bypassing of the town, thus sparing Hoffmeister's brigade much of the terrible difficulty it experienced. "But Vokes, for all his bluster," historian Brereton Greenhous commented, "was never a man for daring or momentum. Or for small leaps of logic. So he sent his long-suffering 2 Brigade to take the town."¹³ Take it they eventually did after the world press painted the fight as "Stalingrad in Italy," the Nazis pulling out finally over the night of 27-28 December.



Hoffmeister's reward for the capture of Ortona came in March 1944 when he was promoted to major-general and given command of the 5th Canadian Armoured Division which had arrived in Italy before the new year and had had both Simonds and General E.L.M. Burns as its GOCs in the intervening month. Hoffmeister had won the job on merit, but it had not hurt that he was a militiaman. The Defence Minister, Colonel J.L. Ralston, made that clear when he wrote to Lieutenant-General Ken Stuart at CMHQ:

Comparing Hoffmeister and [Brigadier T.G.] Gibson both impressed me as excellent. Hoffmeister more magnetic personality. If Hoffmeister reasonably equal in tactical ability would think his personality and the fact that he would give representation on divisional level to the N.P.A.M. [Non-Permanent Active Militia] might warrant giving him the call. . . .¹⁴

Crerar, the Corps commander in Italy, and Burns, his designated successor, agreed¹⁵ and so did the British. General Sir Oliver Leese, commanding the Eighth Army, thought "Brigadier Hochmeister" "excellent," "a grand chap — full of fight," a commander of "immense drive" who "is turning out [to be] a very good Armoured Divisional Commander."¹⁶ Hoffmeister himself learned of his promotion when Harry Crerar, who had summoned him to meet him at a bridge, asked "How would you like to command 5 Armoured?" "Very much. When can I start?" "Well, you're a cool one, aren't you?"¹⁷ He was indeed, and his rise from battalion to division commander without any intervening period of staff employment was

Major General B.M. Hoffmeister, GOC Fifth Armoured Division, in Sherman Command tank "Vancouver." After the battle of the Gothic Line, 31 August 1944, during which the Headquarters troop of the 9th Armoured Regiment (British Columbia Dragoons) was wiped out, "Vancouver" was presented to the regiment by Hoffmeister. It was renamed "Draagoon II" and was the command tank of the regiment until the end of the war. (CFPU 33253)

certainly unprecedented in the Canadian Army in the Second World War.

The 5th Canadian Armoured Division had only two brigades at this point, one armoured and one infantry. Hoffmeister ran it just as he had run his battalion and his brigade. He won over his senior officers very quickly by, for example, telling Brigadier J. Desmond B. Smith, the commander of the 5th Canadian Armoured Brigade, that he knew "bugger all" about handling armour and asking for his help.¹⁸ With the troops, he exerted his personality and showed himself. The 11th Canadian Infantry Brigade, his other brigade, had suffered a bloody repulse in a daylight attack on the Arieli River in January, and the troops still had not recovered their morale. The new GOC visited each unit, inspected their quarters, and demanded improvements where necessary. He made it clear to the officers that their responsibilities included looking after their men, and morale began to rise. It literally soared after Hoffmeister organized divisional exercises to demonstrate the tremendous array of weaponry that the division had. "The punch, the clout this division had was just tremendous," he said, "and no person, private soldier, NCO, or officer could fail to be impressed by this." His exercises including teaching the infantry how to advance behind artillery fire — Hoffmeister personally took every infantry company in turn to show them how to lean into the barrage. This was always a calculated risk, and when the inevitable round fell short on one such demonstration, he remembered the infantrymen looking at him: "What do you say now, wise guy?"¹⁹

But one of his battalions, the Perth Regiment, a unit that had been hard-hit on the Arieli, was not responding and seemed so sullen and unresponsive as to be close to mutiny. Neither the brigade commander nor the battalion commander could suggest how to deal with the difficulty so Hoffmeister arranged for two men from each platoon to meet with him with no other officers or NCOs present.

... I explained to the men exactly what the problem was, and the danger of going into battle with this lack of confidence and the poor morale that existed ... and [said] that we were going to stay there until I had answers. I said "I don't have the names of any of you men and I don't want to know your names; nothing you say here is being recorded, this is for my information ... only, so that I in turn may take the necessary action to get this unit in shape to fight." So we sat there and looked at each other, not a word was said and this went on, it seemed, like a long time. . . . Finally a bit of dialogue started to develop and we worked this around by question and answer to the point where four officers were named as having performed badly in the Arieli thing . . . [and] the men had absolutely no confidence in them and were reluctant to go into battle with them. This was the reason for the low morale. . . . I dismissed the meeting, went back to my HQ, called in the brigade commander and battalion commander and ordered him to dispose of these officers to the holding unit forthwith.²⁰

This was not the usual general's way of dealing with unit morale, but it worked, and the Perths became a very good fighting regiment.

How was it that Hoffmeister knew how to deal with such problems? Part of the answer was instinctive in the man, a simple sense of understanding how soldiers thought and reacted and how they wanted their officers to treat them. But it was also that only six months earlier he had been commanding a rifle battalion in action, and hence he understood what one could and could not do. As a brigadier and as a major-general, however, he knew that he could no longer influence events on the battlefield by seizing a rifle and joining the fray. Now as a GOC he had to stand back and find different ways to motivate soldiers, battalions, and staffs. To his credit, he found the ways, and he was one of the very few senior officers in the Canadian army who thought seriously and systematically about such problems, one of the few who did not simply rely on the authority conveyed by his rank to get his way. Hoffmeister led as well as commanded.²¹

The beginnings of Hoffmeister's impact on his division became apparent in its first major action. When II Canadian Corps attacked the Hitler Line in the Liri Valley on May 23, the plan called for the 5th Armoured, now beginning to think of itself as "Hoffy's Mighty Maroon

Machine," after its coloured divisional arm patch, to pour through a gap in the line opened by the 1st Canadian Division. The plan worked well, though not without heavy fighting, casualties, and delays, and the armoured division drove through the hard-won breach with great panache. For Hoffmeister's headquarters staff, the only problem caused by their GOC was his habit of going forward too far and too often. Useful as that could be and necessary as it was for Hoffmeister to see what opposition he was sending his men to meet, it put him out of touch and left the staff to fight the battle. That caused difficulties.²² There were worse ones. Unfortunately, the Eighth Army's planners had clogged the limited road network in the valley with too much traffic and horrendous jams resulted that slowed the pursuit as the Nazis retreated toward the north. General Burns, the Canadian corps commander, received the blame, and there was a natural tendency to look elsewhere for scapegoats. Hoffmeister's division took its share of the rap, his headquarters making the Corps staff very angry: "It is a hopeless task to try and get anything out of HQ 5 Cdn Div," Brigadier Nick McCarter, the BGS (Brigadier, General Staff), wrote in his personal diary. "They are behaving like complete amateurs." Worse, the division was using routes designated for other units.²³ Then, the commander of 11th Brigade, T.E.D'O. Snow, a PF officer, had to be pushed to exercise command of his troops in action, something that angered and disturbed Hoffmeister. For his part Snow, who was replaced in the next month, also wrote very critically of the division headquarters' conduct of the operation.²⁴ The problems aside, the 5th Armoured had performed well in its first major operation,²⁵ and Hoffmeister too had learned much. Certainly Burns was pleased. As he wrote privately, "Bert Hoffmeister did an excellent job and fought his green division with all the drive we expected of him."²⁶

Hoffmeister's 5th Armoured fought its next major battle on the Nazis' Gothic Line that protected northern Italy and the Po Valley. The Canadian Corps was to attack the Adriatic hinge of the line, and the date for a massive set-piece attack was fixed for the night of 1-2 September 1944. But initial patrol reports on

the night of 29-30 August suggested a strange lack of German activity, and the Corps headquarters decided to move against the enemy on 30 August. Hoffmeister's division now had been strengthened with an additional brigade of infantry, and his battalions once more struggled to open a hole in the line for the tanks. Although the reports were confused and confusing, Hoffmeister made the "gutsy decision" to commit his armoured brigade at once.²⁷ By this time his staff's work was first-rate, Hoffmeister sought advice and took it, and the change in the meticulously-prepared plan was implemented without difficulty.²⁸ After fierce fighting, the Germans, one division in danger of encirclement, began to pull back on September 1. There was much more fighting before the line was cleared, but Hoffmeister's courageous seizure of the initiative had helped greatly to win the battle. Oliver Leese fairly bubbled when he told Montgomery that "The troops fought very well, especially the 5th Cdn Armd Div. This Div, led by Bert Hoffmeister, has the terrific dash of 7th Armd [the British Army's famous Desert Rats] in the old days. They have really done extremely well."²⁹ More concretely, Leese told Hoffmeister that he had earned a vacation and gave him his personal aircraft to take him to Cairo.³⁰ Lieutenant-Colonel Jack English, a severe critic of Canadian army training and operations, agreed with the Eighth Army Commander's assessment. The 5th Canadian Armoured Division's operations on the Gothic Line, he said, "may have been the finest by any Canadian formation in the Second World War."³¹ Praise from English is praise indeed.

Now in his mid-eighties and ill, Hoffmeister remains a commanding presence in his wheelchair. His eyes still fill with tears when he talks about men stopping him on the street to say proudly they had served under him. That, he says, was all the thanks he every wanted.³²



Canadian soldiers examine a map of the Italian Peninsula. (NAC)

NOTES

1. Chris Vokes, *Vokes My Story* (Ottawa, 1985), p.76.
2. Dr. W.J. McAndrew interview with Major-General Chris Vokes, June 1980. Vokes thought problems were widespread in his brigade. For a frank assessment of the Seaforths at this period, see R.H. Roy, *The Seaforth Highlanders of Canada* (Vancouver, 1969), Chap.V.
3. National Archives [NA], Department of National Defence Records [DND], Access Box 34, file 221C1 (D284), Salmon to GOC 1 Cdn Corps, 20 March 1943. Harry Crerar agreed. *Ibid.*, att. to Crerar to McNaughton, 2 April 1943. Cf. docs. on DND, Directorate of History [DHist], H.D.G. Crerar Papers, Hoffmeister file.
4. Daniel Dancocks, *The D-Day Dodgers* (Toronto, 1991), pp.68 & 83.
5. G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Canadians in Italy* (Ottawa, 1957), p.160; Roy, Chap.VI; Vokes, p.119. This was also said to be Montgomery's view. General A.E. Potts Papers (Toronto), Captain J.J. Conway to Potts, 2 November 1943. Hoffmeister's combined arms assault drew notice in *Macleans*: L.S.B. Shapiro, "These Are Our Generals," (1 July 1944), p.44.

6. Major-General B.M. Hoffmeister interview, 2 March 1992. Hoffmeister's approach is documented in Dr. W.J. McAndrew's interview with Lieutenant-Colonel S.W. Thompson, 6 April 1980.
7. Hoffmeister interview.
8. NA, H.D.G. Crerar Papers, vol. 1, 958c.009 (D23), McNaughton to Stuart, n.d.; *Ibid.*, Minutes of Special Meeting. . . 26 September 1943; *Ibid.*, Crerar to McNaughton, 28 September 1943; DND, vol. 10033, file 9/Sr Appts/1, McNaughton to Tow, 16 October 1943.
9. Dr. W.J. McAndrew and B. Greenhous interview with Major-General Hoffmeister, n.d.; Vokes, p.134, wrote that Hoffmeister was his "most capable" battalion commander.
10. McAndrew-Greenhous Hoffmeister interview; Dr. W.J. McAndrew Papers (Ottawa), letter to McAndrew, 2 April 1982.
11. Royal Military College Library, Christopher Vokes Papers, Vertical File, notebook. The casualties covered all December 1943 and left a deficiency of 59 officers and 992 men after reinforcements had been factored in.
12. McAndrew-Greenhous Hoffmeister interview.
13. Brereton Greenhous. "Would It Not Have Been Better to Bypass Ortona Completely . . . ? A Canadian Christmas, 1943." *Canadian Defence Quarterly* (April 1989), pp.51ff. See also Nicholson, Chaps. X-XI.
14. NAC, J.L. Ralston Papers, vol. 37, Appointments Overseas file, Ralston to Stuart, 2 February 1944.
15. DND, Mf. C5438, file HQS 20-5-26-2, Stuart to Murchie, 3 March 1944.
16. Imperial War Museum, Sir Oliver Leese Papers, box 2, Leese to his wife, 4 March, 8 May 1944 and box 1, Mss Autobiography, XII, p. 1; Public Record Office, War Office Records, WO216/168, Leese to General Kennedy, 16 April 1944.
17. Hoffmeister interview.
18. Major-General J.D.B. Smith interview, 14 September 1991; McAndrew Papers, Smith to McAndrew, 29 August 1980. See also Dancocks, pp.233-4.
19. Hoffmeister interview, Dr. W.J. McAndrew interview with Major-General A.E. Wrinch, June 1980.
20. McAndrew-Greenhous Hoffmeister interview. McAndrew's interview with Brigadier Ian Johnston, June 1980, suggests that the 11th Brigade still needed delicate handling when Johnston took command in June 1944. For another comment, see Lieutenant-Colonel J.A. English, "Reflections on the Breaking of the Gothic Line." unpub. paper, n.d., pp.2-3.
21. McAndrew-Greenhous Hoffmeister interview. Hoffmeister interview. McAndrew to author, 28 September 1992.
22. Brigadier Jack Christian interview, 31 May 1991; Colonel Clement Dick interview, 7 May 1991.
23. DND, vol. 10779, McCarter to Colonel Nicholson, p.3 April 1951 and att. diary, entries 24-25 May 1944. See also PRO, WO216/168, Leese to Kennedy, 8 June 1944. McCarter himself was sacked after the battle at Leese's insistence. The McAndrew-Wrinch interview attests to communications problems.
24. Hoffmeister interview, DND, vol. 10982, "Report on Brigadier T.E. Snow." n.d. [June 1944]; *ibid.*, vol. 10774, Snow's "Report on the Battle of the Liri Valley," n.d. For the Corps commander's view of Snow, see Crerar Papers, Vol.7, file 958C.009(D183), Burns to Crerar, 7 June 1944.
25. With some qualifications largely relating to staff work, the British thought so too: PRO, WO214/55, Alexander to CIGS, 29 June 1944.
26. Crerar Papers, vol. 7, file 958C.009 (D183), Burns to Crerar, 7 June 1944.
27. W.J. McAndrew, "Eighth Army at the Gothic Line: The Dog-Fight," *RUSI Journal*, CXXXI (June 1986), p.57. An account of Hoffmeister's training of one of his new battalions, a unit transformed into infantry from anti-aircraft artillery, is in Fred Cederberg, *The Long Road Home* (Toronto, 1989), p.147.
28. Christian interview; McAndrew-Johnston interview; McAndrew interview with C.H. Drury, June 1980. "You did a better job for Hoffmeister than for Simonds," Christian said, because "you could talk to him; you couldn't with Simonds who knew so much more than everyone else."
29. Leese Papers, vol. 4, Leese to Montgomery, 2 September 1944. See also PRO, WO 216/168, Leese to Kennedy, 8 September 1944.
30. Rowland Ryder, *Oliver Leese* (London, 1987), pp.290-1.
31. English, p.15.
32. Hoffmeister interview.

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