PROFILE IN LEADERSHIP

Lieutenant General Lewis H. Brereton: When to Listen to Your Subordinates and When Not to Listen

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General Lewis Brereton can be viewed as the Forrest Gump of the early days of American military aviation. He seemed to be everywhere, at every major turning point, from the first days of air power through the vast air armadas of World War II.

He commanded and flew during the first massed use of U.S. air power, during the 1918 St. Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne offensives, moving up to serve as Billy Mitchell's Chief of Operations in France. After a turbulent interwar period, he served in every major theater of WWII, seemingly in every major action. He was there in the Philippines, serving as General Douglas MacArthur's Air Commander when the Japanese destroyed most of America's air power in the Pacific on the day after Pearl Harbor. From there he was sent to India with his surviving bombers, striking up strained relationships with Generals Claire Chennault and Joe Stilwell and playing a key role in opening up an air route into China. Upon a crisis erupting in the Middle East in 1943, he was redeployed yet again with his surviving forces, to shore up the defenses of the Suez Canal. There, his 9th Air Force executed the costly and essentially unsuccessful raid on the Ploesti oil fields in mid-1943.

Brereton's 9th Air Force then deployed to Great Britain, to provide tactical air support of the Normandy landing and allied ground operations during the breakout. His forces were heavily engaged in Operation COBRA, a massive attack on German defenses that opened the way for the U.S. breakout from Normandy, at the cost of "friendly fire" that killed and wounded hundreds of U.S. soldiers. Three months later, having taken command of the First Allied Airborne Army, Brereton was responsible for the allied airdrops in Operation MARKET-GARDEN the infamous "bridge too far."

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Such an extraordinary career could hardly avoid controversy, nor did Brereton ever spend much energy avoiding a confrontation. One subordinate summarized him as follows: "Clipped and final were his sentences, sweeping were his concepts, and sudden were his decisions." Another commented that "Louis' Brereton pulls no punches…he is aggressive and quick in sizing up a tactical and strategic situation and he can be frank to the point of tactlessness" (Miller, 2000, p. 6).

His career offers a rich source for the study and assessment of leadership. Among the more interesting questions was his interaction with his subordinates in decision-making. Whether a leader accepts a subordinate's advice can be a complex equation that goes beyond merely operational choices and risk management. The act of listening to subordinates can promote teamwork, build trust and loyalty, and increase the confidence subordinates have in their leaders. Ignoring advice accomplishes the opposite. These interactions are perhaps most critical in wartime, where leader decisions lead to life-or-death consequences. This profile examines two cases where General Brereton had to decide whether or not to accept the advice of subordinates. In the case of Operation TIDALWAVE, the B-24 raid on Ploesti, he ignored the advice of subordinates. During Operation MARKET-GARDEN, Brereton accepted his subordinates' advice.

Both cases led to disaster. The Ploesti Raid of 1 August 1943, flown at low level against the advice of Brereton's subordinate commanders, resulted in partial damage to the Ploesti oil refinery complex, at the steep cost of 53 of 177 B-24 bombers committed to the operation. Of the 532 aircrew that did not return from the mission, 330 were killed, 70 were interned in Turkey, and the rest became prisoners of war (Rein, 2012).

Brereton's decisions during Operation MARKET-GARDEN were even more costly. Acting on the advice of his subordinate troop carrier leadership, Brereton decided that each C-47 aircrew should only fly one mission per day and pull only one glider per aircraft. It was a fatal decision, slowing the buildup of Allied forces as the Germans reacted furiously to the airdrop. By the end of the week-long operation, the British and Polish airborne units at Arnhem had lost approximately 1,500 killed and left behind over 6,500 POWs and evaders, about a third of them wounded. Additionally, the two US airborne divisions, the 82nd and 101st, suffered about 3,500 casualties over the course of one week of fighting (Middlebrook, 1994).

In addition to the comparison to Forrest Gump mentioned above, Brereton had an uncomfortable similarity to Ambrose Burnside, the Union general who seemed to play a role in every defeat of the Army of the Potomac during the Civil War. How did Brereton reach these fateful decisions? What can we learn about leadership from these examples?

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Operation TIDALWAVE

As author Christopher Rein relates in The North African Air Campaign, after only two weeks into the battle for Sicily in July 1943, Allied leaders pulled Brereton's two B-24 groups, reinforced him with three more B-24 groups from the UK-based 8th Air Force, and began an intensive training program for a planned low-level attack against the Ploesti oil refineries in Romania (Rein, 2012). Low-level attacks were not standard doctrine for American heavy bomber operations in Europe due to a higher vulnerability to ground fire and difficulty in visual navigation. Additionally, the B-24 was a difficult aircraft to fly, and its heavy controls made low-level flying even more challenging.

The Ploesti plan came directly from General Arnold and his Army Air Forces Plans Division, which considered Axis oil production an essential Combined Bomber Offensive target. The lead planner for Operation TIDALWAVE was Colonel Jacob Smart, who convinced General Eisenhower and the Combined Chiefs of Staff of the need for a low-level attack in June 1943. Thus, Brereton essentially served as a force provider for a plan originating from his superiors in Washington and directed from the highest levels of Allied leadership.

As mentioned earlier, the Ploesti Raid was partially successful at best, and resulted in heavy losses of bomber aircraft and crews. A number of factors contributed to the heavy casualties. There was foul weather on the way from their North African bases to their targets that forced the attacking groups to fly higher and therefore into German radar coverage. There were navigational errors by two of the B-24 groups, and an aggressive defense by now-alerted German fighters and flak guns. The 98th Bomb Group alone lost 26 of 31 aircraft that reached their targets. In the end, the raid damaged important facilities at Ploesti, but it is important to note that the complex was not operating at full capacity. The Axis easily made up for the destruction by increasing production in the undamaged areas, that is, within the existing cushion.

What, then, was Brereton's role in the Ploesti disaster? Christopher Rein blames Brereton for not agreeing with his subordinates that the low-level plan was ill conceived (Rein, 2012). Brereton had the authority to override Smart's low-level concept and develop his own more conventional high-altitude plan for the attack (Schultz, 2007). His subordinate commanders, including his 9th Bombardment Command and 201st Bomb Wing commanders, as well as all five of his B-24 group commanders, disagreed with the low-level concept (Werrell, 2019; Rein, 2012). Two of his groups had been with him in North Africa for several months but three had been assigned recently from 8th Air Force in England. Regardless of their advice, if we are to trust the postwar publication of his diaries, Brereton genuinely believed that the element of surprise would be an important advantage of the low-level concept (Brereton, 1946).

Knowing who to listen to is a vital leadership competency. When considering a technical issue, the opinions of subject matter experts deserve the most consideration. Brereton had considerable flying time in the Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress by 1943 but lacked experience in the Consolidated B-24 Liberator. His subordinate commanders, possessing considerable experience in the B-24, deserved the most attention. He was not, however, personally familiar with most of those subordinate commanders. Instead, Brereton decided to execute the plan endorsed by senior Allied leaders and developed by staffers in Washington and England.

Finally, Brereton's pre-attack briefing to 1,700 B-24 crewmembers in the days leading up to the attack could not have been more morale crushing. As he visited each B-24 group, he told them how important the mission was, potentially shortening the war by starving the Axis of vital fuel production capability. His closing remark, however, jolted all listeners: "If you do your job right it is worth it, even if you lose every plane. You should

consider yourself lucky to be on this mission" (Schultz, 2007, p. 94). He came close to predicting their demise.

Operation MARKET-GARDEN

After North Africa and the Ploesti Raid, Brereton took the 9th Air Force to England, where it would expand rapidly with additional fighter bomber, medium bomber, and C-47 troop carrier units arriving from training. This growing air armada would serve as the tactical air force supporting the Normandy landings. In August 1944 Brereton moved to take command of the First Allied Airborne Army (FAAA). This organization combined US and British airborne divisions with USAAF and RAF transport aircraft to carry them to battle. This was a major responsibility, given the resources invested in the airborne troops and the expectations for their role in the liberation of Europe.

After several cancelled airborne operations following the Normandy breakout, Brereton's FAAA would finally see action in mid-September 1944. On 10 September, Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery, commanding the 21st Army Group on the northern flank of the Allied advance, convinced Eisenhower to allow him to employ the FAAA in a bold offensive in eastern Holland. Intelligence estimates indicated that German forces were broken and in full retreat; in Montgomery's opinion the Allies must strike before the Germans could regroup on the German border. In Operation MARKET-GARDEN three of Brereton's airborne divisions would secure a narrow corridor to Arnhem, capturing several river crossings as British XXX Corps' 20,000 vehicles advanced along a single road. MARKET was the codename for the airborne portion and GARDEN the name for the XXX Corps ground assault. The final objective, 64 miles inside of enemy lines, was the bridge over the Rhine at Arnhem. From there XXX Corps would make a right turn, followed by the rest of British Second Army, and break out into the north German plain—excellent terrain for Allied armored forces. Montgomery envisioned an offensive that, if successful, would end the war in Europe by Christmas 1944.

The campaign opened with daytime drops on 17 September 1944. These were extremely accurate with minimal losses of transport aircraft to the enemy. Nonetheless, the operation ultimately failed. The Germans unexpectedly reacted fiercely, rushing in counterattacking forces that pressed—and at times pierced—that narrow corridor. Poor weather, starting on the second day of operations and continuing throughout the battle, hindered the lift of airborne reinforcements, their supplies, and their expected close air support by Allied tactical air forces. On the night of 25-26 September, fewer than 2,000 British airborne soldiers withdrew across the Rhine, signaling an end to the operation.

So again, it is important to understand Brereton's role in this disaster. The overall concept of the assault belonged to Montgomery and his staff, and again Brereton found himself in a position where he had to make the best of a plan directed from above. At the Army level, Brereton wrestled with the following issues. First, should the drops be conducted during the day or at night? Brereton decided on a daytime drop for a number of good reasons, and this decision proved correct. Daylight would afford more accurate navigation, which had been a hard lesson learned the night before D-day in June. More accurate drops would allow airborne troops to form up quicker and set off for their objectives much sooner, vital when attacking river crossings that needed to be seized immediately.

Routes to the drop and landing zones were another area where Brereton exercised decision-making authority as the FAAA commander. The routes of troop carrier groups had to be carefully planned to avoid German flak concentrations and provide for obvious ground features for visual navigation. These two decisions resulted in unusually accurate drops and minimal aircraft losses on the first day of the operation. However, the low loss

rate came at a high price in combat effectiveness. To achieve it, the allied paratroopers landed far from their objectives, without any coup de main forces designated for a rapid advance and capture of their first-day objectives. Designation of the drop zones, while under Brereton's authority, was a decision that he delegated to his division commanders.

The next two of Brereton's important planning decisions in Operation MARKET dealt with what Brereton chose not to do. These recommendations came from Major General Paul Williams, who commanded Brereton's IX Troop Carrier Command. Brereton and Williams had served together during the interwar years and in England since the pre-Normandy build up. They had developed a close working relationship and presumably a strong level of trust.

Brereton could have directed that his troop carrier units fly two round trip missions on the first day. He decided to execute only one per day. The round-trip sorties to the drop zones were between five and six hours in duration. Two of those in one day, plus the loading process in between, would require some night flying. Williams feared that his crews, notoriously unskilled at night navigation, would not be able to launch and form up during a pre-dawn launch or recover to their bases after dark. He also feared that his maintenance crews, undermanned due to the rapid expansion of his troop carrier forces, would not be able to perform required battle damage repairs and routine refueling and maintenance in time for two lifts. Finally, he was wary of the impact of aircrew fatigue during combat operations; he thought two lifts in one day would be too much to ask of his pilots. And Brereton accepted William's recommendation (Cox, 1985).

Brereton also decided during the planning process to not employ double-tow techniques for gliders. Troop carrier crews had experimented with double-tow, that is, towing two gliders behind one C-47, during the previous year. The double-tow technique worried Williams, who saw the safety concerns of pilot fatigue and reduced maneuverability as a serious issue (Wolfe, 1993).

If used, either one of these techniques—two lifts on the first day or double-tow of gliders—could have doubled the number of paratroopers, glider-borne infantry, and artillery support for the all-important attacks on the first day. The operation was critically dependent on the rapid buildup of Allied forces, especially for the British 1st Airborne Division at Arnhem and the 82nd Airborne Division at Nijmegen. Both of those formations lacked the strength to take and hold their objectives on Day 1. In reaching his cautious decision, Brereton was one among many senior commanders in MARKET-GARDEN who failed to inject the necessary drive and command urgency that were essential to success (Beevor, 2019). He also shared the overconfidence of other commanders, and their failure to anticipate the vicious and rapid German response to the airdrops.

In these decisions, Brereton chose to listen to the advice of his subject matter expert, Major General Williams. This advice, however, focused on a single aspect of the overall mission: airlift. Brereton's decision ignored the more important consideration, which was the set of objectives facing the airborne forces that would define success or failure for Operation MARKET-GARDEN. As the senior commander, with overview of the entire complex and extended operation, Brereton chose the narrow perspective instead of the larger one. It was a fateful mistake.

Conclusion

So what can we take away from Brereton's decision-making for TIDALWAVE and MARKET? First, experience has its limits. Brereton may have been the most experienced combat leader in the Army Air Forces, but he was much better at some aspects of leadership than others. He was an effective planner and organizer, but was considered by important peers—such as General George Kenney—to lack

attention to detail (Miller, 2001). He was abrasive and outspoken, but also brave and aggressive, understood by all to be an effective operator but often displaying a narrow perspective, as in his decisions in MARKET-GARDEN.

Second, leadership is contextual. Any leadership situation must consider the leader, the followers, and the environment. In both cases above, Brereton had to decide whether to accept or ignore advice of subordinates who were experts in employing their weapon systems and the environments where those weapons systems operated. But he also had to consider intelligence reports showing that the German Army was in full retreat and unlikely to offer much resistance. And he had to make the best of orders flowing in from above. During the planning and execution of MARKET-GARDEN it mattered, as well, that FAAA had been established only the previous month, that Brereton had a very contentious relationship with his deputy, British Brigadier General Frederick Browning, that staff procedures and relationships during the planning cycle were erratic and time-compressed, and that there was high-level urgency to employ the airborne forces, of which so much had been expected (Beevor, 2019). Contexts can be very complicated.

Third, as we look back on these events, we need to understand relationships—who was a trusted agent and how long those relationships had been in place. Some of Brereton's subordinates had been recently assigned and some had been serving with him for a relatively long time. How much does familiarity and length of common service impact trust? As a leader, it is important to remember that a technical decision can have strategic consequences. Details matter. Brereton was known for occasional lapses in attention to detail and a tendency to defer to subordinates on technical questions. These traits left him vulnerable to failure in the cases we have discussed.

Finally, we must consider the stakes at play in these decisions. Senior Allied leaders were of the opinion that both of these operations had the potential to significantly shorten the war. Both also had the potential for heavy casualties. We can assume that Brereton did not take his decisions frivolously, and we know from his published diaries that he considered TIDALWAVE and MARKET "extremely successful" and "an outstanding success" respectively, despite the costs in casualties and the failure to achieve their stated objectives (Brereton, 1946, p. 205; 365). History's verdict has been less kind.

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