

General Burns E.L.M Burns

UBC : THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF LAWS (*honoris causa*) CONFERRED AT
CONGREGATION, October 24TH, 1958 LIEUTENANT-GENERAL EEDSON
LOUIS MILLARD BURNS

*“Mr. Chancellor, it is more than possible that in the light of history our
quest and Congregation Speaker today, Lieutenant-General E.L.M. Burns,
Commander of the United Nations Emergency Force, may well emerge as
one of the symbols – indeed of the folk lore – of our time. “*

<http://www.library.ubc.ca/archives/hdcites/hdcites5.html>

His STORY/ CAREER

E.L.M. Burns was born on June 17, 1897 in [Montreal, Quebec](#).^[1] “Tommy” Burns, student # 1032 attended but did not graduate from the [Royal Military College of Canada](#) in [Kingston, Ontario](#) in 1914. He left before graduating to join the Royal Canadian Engineers, into which he was commissioned as a lieutenant in 1915.

World War I

He served in Canada until March 1916 when he went overseas with the 3rd Canadian Division Signal Company. He fought on the Western Front with the Division and Corps signals unit from 1916 to 1918. He became a staff officer with the 9th Brigade in March 1917, dealing with supply and personnel. He became a "staff learner" and acted as liaison officer between forward battalions and brigade headquarters. He returned to Canada in 1919 and was stationed at St. John as an engineer officer.^[2]

Between the wars He attended the School of Military Engineering, Chatham, England, for eighteen months. He was an instructor at the [RMC](#) in [Kingston, Ontario](#). He returned to Halifax and served on duty during the miners' strike at Glace Bay. He worked in the Survey Department in Ottawa. In 1924, he was appointed as an instructor at [RMC](#) in field engineering. He attended the Staff

College at Quetta, British India and returned to Quebec, Canada in 1930.^[3] In 1939, as a Lt-Col, he attended the Imperial Defence College in [London, England](#).

At the outbreak of war in 1939, Lieutenant-Colonel Burns was in Britain attending the Imperial Defence College. He soon had himself attached to the Canadian High Commission, preparing for the arrival of the first Canadian contingent. In mid-1940 he returned to Canada to work for the new Chief of the General Staff, General Crerar, as a colonel, and the next year he took the plum position of Brigadier General Staff to Lieutenant-General A.G.L. McNaughton, commanding the Canadian Corps in the United Kingdom. Burns' career was on the rise—until postal censors in May 1941 intercepted mail to his mistress in Montreal (he was married at the time) and took exception to some of Brigadier Burns' views about the war, British commanders, and Canadian attitudes. Returned to Canada in disgrace, Burns narrowly escaped court-martial though he was reduced in rank to Col. (In the Middle East UBEF 1957 on, his constant companion during Conferences in Jerusalem to Cairo to Beirut- a constant companion always in his personal in his DC 3 Page 128 of *Between Arab and Israeli she stands beside General About to board DC 3 the only woman at the conferences and plane rides and later in with him Gaza City was his secretary Marian Warren*.¹

During WW2 he rose quickly in the ranks. In 1939 he was a staff officer of General Crerar “ Quote – from General Crerar's autobiography – “*After ensuring that Lt Col E.L.M. Burns – an acerbic , unsmiling , but gifted young protégé was preparing the accommodation and equipment for the arrival of 1 division in England , Crerar went on to meet Vincent Massey*”²“ During [World War II](#) General Burns successively commanded the [4th Canadian Armoured Brigade](#), the [2nd Canadian Infantry Division](#), the [5th Canadian \(Armoured\) Division](#) (January 1944 to March 1944), and then finally the [I Canadian Corps](#) (March 1944 until November 1944). His performance as a corps-level commander proved to be controversial, despite the successes of the Canadian forces in the [Italian Campaign](#), and so he was replaced as commander of I Canadian Corps by Lieutenant-General [Charles Foulkes](#) on recommendation of British General Leese. (General Leese was later relieved of his command in the India –Burma theatre later on in the War by non other than Lord Mountbatten)

¹ Tommy Burns as a Military Leader-A Case Study using Integrative Complexity “ Canadian Military History, 3, 63-67. J.L. Granatstein and Peter Suedfeld¹

² A Thoroughly Canadian General- A Biography of General H.D.G Crerar by P D Dickson 2007Toronto UTP page 123

Civilian life He served as Deputy Minister of Veterans' Affairs. He served as a President of the United Nations Association of Canada during the 1950s.

He played a critical role in the Middle East peace process from 1954 to 1959. He was instrumental in developing UN [peacekeeping](#). As Chief of Staff in 1954, United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) was designed to maintain the General Armistice Agreements until permanent peace could be formulated. He served as a Special Staff of the Truce Supervision Organization in Palestine (1954–56) with the Department of External Affairs and was thus nearby when the [Suez Crisis](#) of 1956 occurred.

He led the [UNEF](#) from **November 1956 to December 1959**. He was Canada's principal [disarmament](#) negotiator from 1960-68.³

GENERAL BURNS HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS CANADA'S INTELLECTUAL GENERAL ⁴-

“He (Burns) hasn't the experience or flair for command. He's dour. He hasn't any presence. Command is not what you do, but the way you do it. Burns was a first class, damn good, excellent staff officerbut not cut out to be a field commander.”

versus

“ His penetrating intellect and “avant garde “ thinking ,combined with his prolific writing ,have left an indelible record which easily establishes Lt Gen Burns as one of Canada's best ,if not only ,intellectual generals.”

The first perspective was written by one of his divisional commanders in Sicily – Maj Gen Chris Vokes-in Italy in 1944 when General Burns was his soon to be relieved Corps Commander –

The second perspective was written by Lt Col B Born and Mr M Wycznski in 2001- one a professor then in 2001 RMC –the other then D Hist at DND.⁵

³ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E._L._M._Burns

⁴ Vokes – My Story by Maj Gen Vokes : “.Toronto P 184

⁵ Warrior Chiefs –Perspectives on Senior Canadian Leaders Dundurn Press Toronto 2001 P 158

Burns difficult character earned him the reputation of being a dour intellectual .

In mid 1943 an evaluation report prepared for the attention of Defence described Burns as follows: “*Exceptionally high qualifications but not a leader .Difficult man to approach, cold and sarcastic. He will never secure devotion of his followers. Has probably the best brains in the Army and whilst he leads his division successfully, he would be given greater service as a staff officer.*”⁶

The above would appear to substantiate both of the perspectives or opinions given above!!

A story both “complex and depressing “ is how Lt General Burns describes in the Preface to his book –“Between Arab and Israeli” by Lt General ELM Burns- on his Peacekeeping experience in the Middle East in the late 1950s and United Nation Emergency Force 1.

Alas complex and depressing describes this Generals life in general.⁷

Besides Vokes who spoke out against him behind his back, another of his Division Commanders Maj General Bert Hoffmeister describes his then boss Gen Burns the then Cdn Corps Commander as lacking the poise and charisma of his British counterparts. “*He moved slowly, gave orders in a monotone manner and lacked the enthusiasm to sell the plan*” says Hoffmeister of Burns.⁸

Yet General Burns was aware of this drawback of charisma – the so called “Montgomery technique” of jumping on the hood of a jeep and addressing the troops before a battle. General Burns mentions in his book written after his book on Peacekeeping called ” *General Mud*”

“Being a poor speaker, and thus averse to talking to large groups than could fill a medium sized room ,I never tried the Montgomery technique . Looking back, I

⁶ IBID P 163 from Ralston Papers Vol 54 File –Officer Assesment

⁷ Between Arab and Israeli by Lt General ELM Burns Clarke Irwin 1962 Toronto Page 6

⁸ Bert Hoffmeister at War: The Soldiers General by Douglas E.Delaney UBC Press Vancouver 2005 page 178

regret I never had any instruction in public speaking –or thought that I needed it, until with seniority in rank I appreciated its importance. It is an art which any young officer aspiring to rise in the military profession should learn and practice”⁹

Another possible reason for his removal from Corps was General Burns was “not British Army enough” – General Simonds was well liked by Montgomery mostly because Simonds used his British connections to the hilt including his British birth and Simonds graduated from the Staff College at Camberley UK in 1937.

Burns was a diffident -smart -introvert. No jumping on jeeps for him. When you think about it –these characteristics are very Canadian – not very noisy – a bit grey and dull – middle of the road. This might have done him in with his British boss General Leese and General Montgomery – “not part of the Club old boy!” Most Canadian Officers and even Cdn Generals were referred to as “TG’s or *Temporary Gentlemen* by their British peers.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned at the beginning- I am neither a professor nor historian. Nor am I an ex general- nor was not in Italy in WW2 . My experience was only from a Peacekeeping perspective – from a serving Canadian regular force army officer - having spent two consecutive tours in the Sinai and Lebanon with UNEF-The Peacekeeping era .This but one chapter in the General Burns long career.

As General Burns said: “*A story both complex and depressing – as many aspects of Middle East affairs are apt to appear to the Westerner who studies them.*” And even more difficult for a young officer who lived in Middle East for two years solid.

General Burns might have had a serious intellectual demeanour. We forget that he became the Commander in the Middle East of UNTSO two years before he assumed command of UNEF. He had to administer four separate peace agreements

⁹ General Mud Lt Gen E.L.M Burns Clarke Irwin 1970 Toronto Page 9

between Israel and four Arab countries – each Arab country-Lebanon –Egypt-Syria and Jordan had a different approach to the Agreement – each one needed a different approach to each and every particular problem. General Burns mind was up to the challenge.

Also when UNEF began he had to put together an army from 9 different nations – some arriving by ship with no vehicles –other arriving by plane with nothing more than their uniforms and rifles. He had written a book¹⁰ on Manpower in the Canadian Army in World War 2 – when he analyzed in detail what was needed and definitely not needed in by the Canadian Army in WW2. He was able to use this encyclopaedic knowledge when forming the world’s first international peacekeeping force. The Force worked well internally –their biggest problem was never internal squabbling between counties as diverse as India to Columbia to Canada to Yugoslavia –rarely if ever. Dealing with far distant New York UN Headquarters became his problem and each succeeding UN commanders “challenge”.

Canadian military commanders have not received generous treatment by and large from Canadians. The North West campaign of 1885 –General Middleton –Sir Arthur Currie WW1 – General Crerar – Rear Admiral Murray WW2 . A national trait -perhaps¹¹

Yes – the introduction at UBC when he received honorary doctorate is very appropriate – General Burns is part of our Canadian military folklore as well as military history.

¹⁰ **Manpower** and the Canadian Army 1939 to 1945 Toronto, 1956

¹¹ Geraralship and the Art of the Admiral ibid p367