

INTERVIEW WITH
Marshal of the Royal Air Force Lord Portal
K.G., G.C.B., O.M., D.S.O., M.C.

by

Dr. John E. Wickman
Director

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for

Dwight D. Eisenhower Library



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Rosemary Ann Portal
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15th October, 1976.
Date

James B. Ponder
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DR. WICKMAN: This interview is with Viscount Portal on his activities during the Second World War and particularly his relationship with General Eisenhower and other Americans. One of the first questions I wanted to ask you, Lord Portal, was your estimate or some estimate of General [Henry H.] Arnold's ability and what he contributed to the joint American-British effort in air power?

VISCOUNT PORTAL: Well, Dr. Wickman, I would like to make it perfectly clear at the start that I'm speaking from memory of twenty-five years ago, that I'm now getting pretty old and you may have to get other views on some of the things I'm going to say. But I would have it be quite clear that I have always regarded General Arnold as a wonderful cooperator, a great helper of the air force at the beginning of your participation in the war in helping the Royal Air Force to get the aircraft we so badly needed from America. And another thing I remember very clearly about him is his intense keenness to benefit from our experience of the two years we had already been in the war when America came in. He was absolutely without preconceived ideas. He appeared to have only one object which was to get the right answer to all of his



problems, and naturally we did our best to help him as he had done his best to help us in getting the aircraft.

WICKMAN: One question I'd like to ask you there, what do you think it was that the British learned from their experience with air power that helped Arnold?

PORTAL: Well a great deal of it of course was tactical, the tactics of the German aircraft; our own organization, the extent of our losses, how we tried to avoid losses; our methods of operation. Every book was open to him and he was very keen to look into them.

WICKMAN: I just wanted to bring that one point out.



PORTAL: Of course we recognized him as a great airman personally, quite apart from his position. And of course, in those days he was not out of the control of the army. He was under the army and very keen naturally that his air force should make its own name in the war, not merely as an auxiliary force but as an independent arm of the services. And as we had been that for, whatever it was, twenty years, he

had something to learn from us on organization, or at least he said he had.

WICKMAN: Let's turn from that particular point to air power generally. I asked you this question before and I'll repeat it about anything you can remember, reminiscences you may have about any controversy there might have been between the British and the Americans on the use of air power, strategically or especially in connection with D-Day.

PORTAL: I don't remember any difference of opinion except insofar as there had to be a conference which everybody of importance came, to which everybody came who had a reason for being there, to determine how the air force should be used after D-Day, in the preparation for and immediately after D-Day. And I think there were genuine, there may well have been genuine differences of view about the targets which would help the army most to get ashore. But I don't think there was any difference of view that the right targets were those that would help the army to get ashore. And, certainly, as far as the Royal Air Force was concerned, I had given a



pledge to my colleagues on the chiefs of staff that when D-Day was laid out, when we knew it was going to come off, then everything that we had, the bombers and all, should be put onto the task of helping the army to get ashore and get established ashore. And that we did. And the Bomber Command who had, I think it's fair to say, been a little doubtful about whether that was the best way to employ them, did the most splendid job in against the coast defenses, against bridges, railways, isolating the battlefield. And I think they did even better than Sir Arthur Harris thought they would; anyhow, I know he got very keen on it. And they did a splendid job. And I don't think there was ever any serious difference of opinion after the battle was launched about the best way of helping the troops to win.

WICKMAN: You mentioned before, there was one point about day bombing as opposed to night bombing.

PORTAL: Yes, at one time, I would guess, I can't remember exactly, I would guess it was about 1942, there was very deep doubt in the minds of some military people and particularly doubt in the minds of some ministers about whether the



American air force would be able to go on day bombing in the face of the casualties they suffered before they ever got into Germany. They did some bombing short of Germany as you remember, and they suffered very heavy casualties. And there was quite a movement afoot to persuade them to give up day bombing in formation and to adapt their aircraft and train their crews to add the American to our effort at night. Well I was never in favor of that; I was always in favor of letting our allies do what they thought they could do and backing them up. The Generals wanted to go on with it, and I did my utmost to persuade our ministers, particularly Mr. Churchill, to encourage them to go on, which is what we eventually did.

WICKMAN: I've noted in some of the reading I've done and whatnot that you seem to have been a very definite advocate or supporter, certainly, of the committee system in this situation, that is the committee of the allies, working on these things jointly, rather than two diametrically opposed views brought together and then having to fight it out.

PORTAL: Yes, well things do have to be fought out. If there are genuine differences of opinion, they have to be resolved;

the question is at what level. Sometimes I think our planners resolved these problems at their level so they never got up to the top. But on other occasions, they couldn't resolve them and the result was they came up and either the chiefs of staff, the joint chiefs of staff, or the combined chiefs of staff resolved them, or, in the bitter end, the ministers, the President and the Prime Minister had to resolve them. But there were relatively few occasions where the heads had to be banged together by the ministers. I think the combined chiefs of staff had very few failures to agree, though they had many battles before an agreement was reached. I believe in the committee system; of course I believe in the supreme commander in the field. But when you're planning and apportioning resources, I think all points of view have to be taken into account and the people responsible have to resolve them. If they are resolved at a fairly low level, in other words if the disagreement is over something fairly trivial, all the better. But if it's a big thing it's got to be done at the top and I can see no way in the planning field as opposed to the battle-field, I can see no way of resolving them except through everybody having their say and being persuaded, in the end, to agree.



WICKMAN: Is it your recollection that General Eisenhower tried to consciously work at this objective of getting agreement at the lowest possible level and bringing it on in with a certain degree of harmony.

PORTAL: Well, so long as he was convinced that everyone was out for the common good and not trying to build empires or run a show of his own, he was very ready to accept what was agreed to. But woe betide anybody he caught out trying to push his own side for any motive other than the desire to win the war as quickly as possible.

WICKMAN: When we were talking before about your general impression of General Eisenhower, that probably sums it up as well as we're ever going to do.

PORTAL: Yes, he was a man absolutely dedicated to cooperation between the two sides. Everybody knows this--it's been said a hundred times--but I can say it again. He was utterly dedicated to forgetting about nationalities, sometimes forgetting about rank, but always being on the side of the best plan and the best man, whatever his uniform, whatever his service.

WICKMAN: Let's touch on this business about TORCH and ANVIL; that's another thing we were going to talk about. I think in the preliminaries I had said to you that I had received the impression, maybe erroneously, that there was some difference of opinion between the Americans and the British about the importance of TORCH versus ANVIL and you were in the process of correcting me.

PORTAL: Well, I don't think TORCH and ANVIL were alternatives really in time; one was very much earlier than the other. My recollection--and again I emphasize that I'm speaking from memory--my recollection of the opposition to TORCH, if there was any serious opposition, was that it came from a certain nervousness on the part of the American chiefs of staff about being penned into the Mediterranean. I think they thought that the Straits of Gibraltar is a very narrow bit of sea and that once they had gone through this narrow entrance, if anything went wrong in Spain, they might be cut off. And that was, I think, the basis of certain reluctance they showed at the start to come in with us on TORCH. But I think it was soon dissipated. And what really I think decided them was the enormous saving of shipping which would result from opening

the Mediterranean so they wouldn't have to go the whole way around Africa to get to Egypt and the Middle East. Once they had agreed to go for it, they went for it full out, and I'm sure General Eisenhower was just as confident as everybody else that we should have done it, pull it off. I was very much in favor of it, personally; I'd always been in favor of trying to get North Africa.

[Interruption]



WICKMAN: We were considering the question of what, in connection with your position, was the most difficult problem during the war, and you indicated that this was a question of priorities. Now my question is priorities between what?

PORTAL: Well, I think it would be fair to say that the most serious problem with priorities as it appeared to me from my seat, the most difficult one as it appeared to me from my seat in the Air Ministry was the conflicting claims of the Bomber Command for bombers to bomb Germany and the Admiralty for bombers to hunt for and, if found, bomb submarines. And I personally never believed that the submarine, German sub-

marine offensive, would be fatal. Judging by the figures of submarine losses, of shipping losses and of ship building, particularly in America, I never looked at this as a mortal danger. And I was concentrating all I could on the bombing of Germany which for many years was the only way in which the Allies could hit the Germans. I was, therefore, continually having to fight against robbing, as I call it, robbing the Bomber Command to feed the Coastal Command with bombers which were really not designed for the job of finding and attacking submarines at the expense of the bombing of Germany which was going on at an intensive rate and which really had all too few people already to bear the burden of casualties. I don't know if it's generally known, but we had over 40,000 men killed in the Bomber Command apart from wounded and missing; we had over 40,000 killed. And those people were carrying a tremendous burden; whereas the Coastal Command people, to whom I give the utmost credit for doing a splendid job, they were flying, I would guess, hundreds of hours--it might even be thousands of hours--for every submarine they were able to attack, they could see and attack. And therefore,



combining all those beliefs in my mind, I was dead against robbing the Bomber Command to feed the Coastal Command. We had to do it; we were ordered to do it by the ministers at one period and we did it. But I certainly would have avoided doing it if I could have.

WICKMAN: Did this question ever come to General Eisenhower as Supreme Allied Commander, or did it not get that far?

PORTAL: I don't remember his ever having come in. It was generally a domestic, you can call it a battle, it was a domestic battle between the chief of the naval staff and the chief of the air staff, with the chief of the general staff of the army perhaps being the umpire. But it went on for a long time and I remember it only too well.

