The HARD STONE:

An account of the rise of Arthur William Tedder from one pip to five stars in thirty years. Between 1915 and 1945.

By Vincent Orange, University of Canterbury New Zealand

Please forgive me for offering so long-winded a title. As an antidote to military history, I often watch television costume dramas. Not only do I begin to see my Air Marshals as an amalgam of such fascinating characters as Tom Jones, Archdeacon Grantly and Fitzwilliam Darcy with, I'm afraid, a dash of Mr Tulkinghorn, Bill Sikes and Obadiah Slope thrown in to some of them, but I find I'm now trying to *write* like an 'Eng Lit' novelist. Fear not, however, I won't *speak* for as long as they did when set before an audience.

Those novelists would, I believe, have found in Tedder's rise to the top an excellent illustration of their own interest in the unexpected transformation of ugly ducklings into glorious swans. Tedder did not come from a military family (his grandfather was merely a grocer, his father a civil servant; one uncle became a librarian and another a railway executive), nor did he even *choose* a military career. When the Great War began, our hero was serving as a Colonial Office clerk in Fiji with every prospect of a pension, plus free pencils, after 30 years of diligent toil. On returning to England, determined to do his bit in a national crisis as a gentleman should, he received a commission as a Second Lieutenant in January 1915 in the Dorsetshire Regiment.

But almost at once he managed to twist a knee. *Not*, alas, while wrestling with a beastly Hun, nor even while undergoing strenuous training. He was merely wandering about the camp at Wyke Regis, near Weymouth, and could not recall how he had hurt himself. Considered unfit for manly duties, after several weeks of hobbling about, Tedder was packed off to a base camp in Calais, where odds and sods from a variety of regiments were dumped. There he conducted pay parades, organised sports and entertainment and made sure that men returning to their units had everything they need, 'from an overcoat to a toothbrush'. Having established his place in the military hierarchy, and been awarded a *second* pip, he was appointed to serve on a board of enquiry. From this elevated position, he was required to consider some doubtful bacon, smell it carefully, and decide whether it should – or should not – be served to the men.

In January 1916, however, naked ambition got the better of him and Tedder effected a transfer to the Royal Flying Corps. To achieve this transfer, Tedder had fought the first of many paper wars with devious, idle or overworked bureaucrats and finally triumphed. Without the energy, resolution and low cunning to fight these battles, you will never reach high rank, no matter how brilliant you are as an airman or strategist.

Tedder qualified as a pilot and served on the Western Front for twelve months. After six months with 25 Squadron, mostly as a flight commander, he spent another six months in command of 70 Squadron. In 25 Squadron, he flew a two-seater machine, the FE 2b, which had its engine placed behind the crew. In 70 Squadron, he flew the Sopwith One and a Half Strutter: the RFC's first aircraft with a machine-gun firing through the propeller arc and the observer seated *behind* the pilot.

During that year, Tedder's duties included the bombing of railway targets: a matter that would provoke a most intense debate with his American allies in the next war. He was then assigned to training duty in Shropshire (where American airmen came under his command for the first time) and afterwards in Egypt, where he eventually presided over a massive organisation capable of turning out dozens of pilots and observers at precisely the moment when they were no longer needed. He ended the war in the exalted rank of Lieutenant-Colonel, but had earned no decorations for gallantry and shown no particular skill as a pilot, even though he greatly enjoyed flying.

Before the war, while at Magdalene College, Cambridge, Tedder had passed examinations researched and written a book about the Royal Navy...

Before the war, while at Magdalene College, Cambridge, Tedder had passed examinations researched and written a book (about the *Royal Navy* if you please, back in the 17th Century). Having been granted a permanent commission in the Royal Air Force in 1918 as a Squadron Leader, he went on – at Greenwich for one year, at the Imperial Defence College for another and at Andover for three – to master such amazingly difficult skills as writing and delivering lectures and marking students' essays. These achievements, though breathtaking, do not amount to the kind of experience usually thought necessary to prepare a man to become one of the great military commanders of the Second World War.

Charles Wilson, later Lord Moran, who was Winston Churchill's doctor during the Second World War, met Tedder in 1943 and assessed him more perceptively than most observers. Wilson had been told that Tedder's father, 'a rough diamond, fought his way from the bottom to become head of the Excise. In the son the facets have been polished, but the hard stone is left'.[1]

In 25 Squadron, he flew a two-seater machine, the FE 2b, which had its engine placed behind the crew

In fact, Tedder's father was by no means 'a rough diamond'. Privately educated in England and France, Arthur John Tedder joined the Inland Revenue Department at the age of nineteen in 1871 and often earned extra money as a neat, careful copier of documents and sometimes by translating French into English. He had literary and especially artistic interests, regularly visiting art galleries. A well-organised man, used to being on the move and living out of a suitcase, Arthur was imperturbable, thoughtful and very hard-working. He became Chief Inspector, Excise, in 1906 and was responsible for working out the details of Lloyd George's Old Age Pension Scheme, a task for which he was knighted in July 1909 and promoted to Chief Inspector, Customs and Excise, a year later. From 1911 to 1918, Sir Arthur was Commissioner of Customs and Excise and was appointed CB in 1918. Not a 'rough diamond' then, but undoubtedly a determined achiever and Charles Wilson was certainly right to notice with what energy the son emulated the father.

Tedder, added Wilson, 'seems quite unlike anyone in the service I have met – a quick mind and a sharp tongue'. Both of which got him into trouble at times, for he was not always patient with slower minds and his tongue could cut sharply. He also had a taste for whimsical humour that some found baffling or irritating.

Most observers agree that he was unpompous. In my opinion, he developed this natural characteristic into an effective symbol. Let me explain. Neither you nor I can visualise General George C Marshall sitting on the sand, without his jacket, puffing away at a pipe and chatting with frontline troops. Nor can we imagine Marshall wandering casually – and alone – into aircraft servicing areas, wearing an old raincoat without rank badges, nattering away with fitters and riggers about overhead camshaft valves and suchlike and then apologetically asking the way to headquarters.

But Tedder did. Like the rest of us, he doubtless wished he had Marshall's magnificent presence, his gravity, stillness and silent command. Although these qualities all came naturally to Marshall, I am sure that he carefully nurtured them and was perfectly well aware of the effect he had on people. Even President Roosevelt, himself a man of overwhelming personality, only ventured to call him 'George' once. You cannot *learn* to overawe people with a word or freeze them at a glance; Tedder knew this and found other ways to impress them.

Another example of creating an effective symbol. Neither you nor I can visualise Tedder dressed in General Patton's boots, pistols and helmet. But I see no essential difference between Tedder impressing his men as a helluva fellow by appearing among them looking like a low-grade civilian clerk who's just lost his job and Patton achieving the same result – of being an admired centre of attention – by decking himself out like a Prince of Ruritania in a Hollywood spectacular. Both men, I believe, knew exactly what they were doing and enjoyed themselves immensely while doing it.

These and all other outstanding commanders, ancient and modern, had in common 'the hard stone' which Charles Wilson saw in Arthur Tedder. Without it they could not have reached the top. What is the composition of that stone? The analysis I offer you is based on my present understanding of Tedder's character, in which I have so far found these ten elements.

Firstly, *ambition*. Tedder was driven by a powerful urge to get on. By 'ambition', I do *not* mean some vague hope that his turn for promotion might come along in AMP's good time if he made no serious blunders and his contemporaries did. I mean working your socks off and making the right connections to ensure that AMP is left in no doubt, by advocates further up the great chain of being, that your time is now. Tedder's drive was fuelled above all by the example of his loving but

strict parents. From infancy, he knew that his father had begun life as an accounts clerk and risen to knighthood and on to Commissioner of Customs and Excise and Companion of the Order of the Bath. These are achievements setting even the most motivated son stiff targets to aim at.

Tedder's ambition was encouraged also by the knowledge that his elder brother Harry had been cut off in his prime, by fever in India, aged only 27 in June 1906. Harry, being dead so young, long before it could be known how far he would go in the Indian Civil Service, was virtually canonised by his parents and Arthur felt – rightly or wrongly – that his parents measured whatever he managed to do against Harry's unlimited potential and found Arthur wanting.

His school (Whitgift, in Croydon) and his Cambridge college both fostered personal ambition in those far off, unenlightened days. Their teaching was reinforced by Tedder's decision to marry in 1915, aged 25. He and his wife started a family the following year (ultimately of three children) and so he had a consequent desire to provide handsomely for them – not an easy desire to fulfil even for a successful officer during many poorly-paid years between the wars.

His school (Whitgift, in Croydon) and his Cambridge college both fostered personal ambition in those far off, unenlightened days. Their teaching was reinforced by Tedder's decision to marry in 1915...

Tedder seated third from left – seated row

A second element in his character was *sacrifice*. Tedder was ready to set aside his most cherished pleasures whenever they conflicted with work, which always came first in his life. Let us reflect on what he was prepared to neglect for the sake of his career.

Tedder was ready to set aside his most cherished pleasures whenever they conflicted with work, which always came first in his life

Most of all, the company of his beloved wife and children. Like many career officers of his generation, he had no permanent home until he retired and his children were educated away from their parents' temporary quarters or lodgings, at boarding-schools.

As well, Tedder often gave up the company of friends for the sake of his career: men and women with whom he relished serious conversation about the meaning of life and the purpose of artichokes, far into the night.

In addition, he never allowed himself enough time for sketching and painting. These were hobbies for which he had an uncommon natural talent, enough to have earned him a living, had he received artistic training. But such a career – even in the commercial world and certainly not in that of theatre – would have been unacceptable to his parents.

...he never allowed himself enough time for sketching and painting. These were hobbies for which he had an uncommon natural talent...

Then there was the piano, which he played fluently, but less skilfully than he would have liked. Tedder loved most proper music, though not that composed by Richard Wagner, which is strange for so sensitive a man, given that Wagner produced the most entrancing sounds yet conceived by the human race. As for literature, he read widely – novels, non-fiction and plays – but only at long intervals, when on leave and when he had no official documents to study.

Above all, Tedder loved the outdoors and yet he sacrificed much of his life to indoor offices. He belonged to that sub-section of humanity which positively enjoys getting cold and wet or hot and sticky in tents, eating poorly-cooked food without properly-prepared wines, waving away flies and picking insects out of clothing, far from bathrooms, lavatories, electric power and comfortable armchairs. In this connection, we should notice that he first achieved greatness in Egypt and Libya, where such appalling conditions were normal.

A third element in his make-up was the desire for *knowledge*. Tedder was determined to master every aspect of the jobs to which he was assigned, not merely those aspects in which he already had an interest. He therefore gradually expanded his aviation expertise from a simple love of flying to embrace navigation, photography and reconnaissance; tactics of aerial combat and bombardment; methods of training (both on the ground and in the air); armament and bombsights; the design and production of engines and airframes; and (by far the most difficult of all these tasks) how to write lectures and mark essays.

Tedder was determined to master every aspect of the jobs to which he was assigned, not merely those aspects in which he already had an interest

Fourthly, *welfare*: in general terms, attending to the well-being of everyone under his command. Tedder made a determined effort to meet (or at least to study the records of) as many men as possible. You will have noticed, I'm sure, that most commanders in all services during the Second World War were distinctly more alive to this aspect of leadership than the commanders of the First World War: under whom, of course, they had themselves suffered and at least learned from them what *not* to do. Tedder did not find this an altogether agreeable task, for he was by no means a natural politician, permanently poised to blather and smirk, but he was genuinely interested in attending to the welfare and furthering the careers of his subordinates.

His name, and that of his second wife, Toppy, will always be associated with the Malcolm Clubs. They were founded for airmen in Algiers in 1943 to honour the memory of a most gallant pilot, Wing Commander Hugh Gordon Malcolm, VC, killed over Chouigui, Algeria, in December 1942. His was the only Victoria Cross awarded to an airman in the entire African campaign.

No military operation received more passionate attention from Tedder than did the fortunes of the Malcolm Clubs from 1943 until the end of his life. They offered civilised comfort, such as he had sought for men under his command ever since 1915. Unfortunately, they were an unofficial organisation, with no Air Ministry backing, and were held to compete with (rather than to complement) NAAFI's activities. With a single exception, no clubs were permitted in Britain and they were never allowed to expand overseas on a scale the Tedders thought desirable. Yet fourteen clubs outlived them, thanks to constant advocacy and energetic fund-raising by the Tedders, their friends and supporters.

Fifthly, *listening*. Hardest of all tasks, for an academic. Tedder learned to listen as well as talk. He tried to hear what was being said, even when it was not what he wanted to hear. He then tried to evaluate that information on its merits (as opposed to his wishes) before making his decisions.

Tedder learned to listen as well as talk. He tried to hear what was being said, even when it was not what he wanted to hear

It is very difficult to listen, even to superior officers, let alone to contemporaries and subordinates. But if you can learn to do this, you will have cracked, I believe, one of the most fundamental secrets not only of successful high command in the military sphere, but successful rule in any sphere, ancient or modern – to say nothing of improving relations with your family and friends.

A most interesting study could be made of disasters that have at their root a failure by the ruler and his or her advisers to listen, evaluate and *then* decide. During the last 25 years, while writing about the careers of Keith Park, 'Mary' Coningham and now Arthur Tedder, it seems to me that this ability singled them out more than anything else from most of their contemporaries.

A sixth important element in Tedder's character was the ability to give *orders*. Even as a Second Lieutenant, he gave sensible orders clearly and acted firmly if they were not obeyed promptly and exactly. This ability, common enough among officers of all nations who were born about 1890,

A sixth important element in Tedder's character was the ability to give orders. Even as a Second Lieutenant, he gave sensible orders clearly and acted firmly if they were not obeyed...

owed as much to the unshaken hierarchical structure of the societies into which they were born as to their subsequent military training. Parents, teachers and employers, no less than officers, gave orders to those in their charge. They expected to be obeyed and, as a rule, they were. Although Tedder was usually willing to listen and even to encourage discussion of his intentions, prompt and absolute obedience must follow the announcing of a decision.

Seventhly, *ruthlessness*. Tedder had, moreover, the moral courage – you might call it the necessary ruthlessness – to get rid of subordinates who failed, whether through slackness, ignorance or even bad luck. He never delegated this responsibility and in 1946, when Chief of the Air Staff, he found it had an extra dimension: the need to get rid of men who had *not* failed. Tedder was obliged to prune the RAF's higher ranks in order to make room for younger men to rise in a service now being drastically reduced in size.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Keith Park was a commander greatly admired by Tedder, who said of him: 'If ever any one man won the battle of Britain, he did'. Nevertheless, Park was one of those whom Tedder pruned early in 1946. Park, deeply distressed, thought the decision to retire him had originated with Jack Slessor, now AMP, and a man with whom Park had quarrelled when they were both serving in the Middle East during 1944. It would therefore have been easy for Tedder to let him continue to think so (the more readily because Tedder himself disliked Slessor heartily), but he did not. 'Put the blame squarely where it belongs', he told Park, 'on *my* shoulders – not on the Service'.

Eighthly, *patronage*. Tedder's merits as a flight and squadron commander on the Western Front during the Great War attracted favourable notice from Trenchard himself, who stood by him against a formidable adversary: Hugh Dowding, later to earn fame as one of the heroes of the Battle of Britain. In September 1922, the Chanak Crisis (a Turkish challenge to British control of the Dardanelles) threatened to escalate into war. The British Prime Minister, Lloyd George, and Winston Churchill, his Colonial Secretary, were hot for military action, but fortunately wiser heads prevailed and both LG and Churchill were thrown out of office.

Tedder had so impressed Trenchard that his was one of three squadrons sent from England to Constantinople in support of a strong naval and military force

Tedder had so impressed Trenchard that his was one of three squadrons sent from England to Constantinople in support of a strong naval and military force. Dowding challenged Tedder over the amount of equipment he took from England to Constantinople for his squadron's use and threatened him with a court martial; an action which would almost certainly have scuppered Tedder's prospects of high office. As it happened, Dowding was misinformed and had committed himself to an opinion before ascertaining the facts. Tedder, who had actually behaved correctly, answered Dowding bluntly. Being right does not always protect a Squadron Leader against the wrath of an Air Vice-Marshal. In this instance it did: helped, no doubt, by the already well-known fact that Trenchard despised Dowding.

Almost 20 years later, in October 1941, Tedder was saved from the even more formidable wrath of Prime Minister Churchill by new patrons: Sir Charles Portal (CAS), Sir Wilfrid Freeman (Vice-CAS) and General Auchinleck, commander of the British Army in North Africa. A dispute arose about respective air strengths on the eve of a major operation and Churchill invited all three to sack

Tedder. All three refused and the Prime Minister backed down. Patronage helps, but in both these cases Tedder's exceptional merits made the difference.

A ninth element in his character was *calmness*. Tedder would find and develop in himself the ability to remain calm under pressure. He could write, argue or act thoughtfully as well as quickly when being hard pressed for time or by an impatient higher authority. This admirable peacetime capacity would prove invaluable under the infinitely greater strains of wartime. He rarely lost his temper in public and rarely allowed argument to degenerate into mutual recrimination. His waspish tongue occasionally wounded more deeply than he intended, but in general his cool head, lively sense of humour and recognition that silence often makes an effective answer enabled him to reach workable agreements.

Tedder would find and develop in himself the ability to remain calm under pressure. He could write, argue or act thoughtfully as well as quickly when being hard pressed...

Which brings me to the tenth and final ingredient in Tedder's hard stone: a thorough grasp of *strategy*. He had studied history for his Cambridge degree; he published a book on the Royal Navy's handling of a major war in the middle of the 17th Century (a book still favourably cited in bibliographies); he wrote essays on military history while studying at the Royal Naval Staff College, Greenwich, in 1923-4; and he lectured on military history for three years, 1929-31, at the RAF staff college, Andover. During that time, he wrote a perceptive analysis of the Gallipoli campaign which deserved publication. You and I need to believe that such a background equips a keen officer to master not only the details of past conflicts, but also to understand the essential social, economic and political setting of those conflicts.

...in 1923-4 he lectured on military history for three years, 1929-31, at the RAF staff college, Andover. During that time, he wrote a perceptive analysis of the Gallipoli campaign which deserved publication

Even before the Second World War began, Tedder had recognised – and never lost sight of – one fundamental principle: that Britain could not indefinitely resist, let alone defeat, Germany without American support. He knew that neither Britain's own aircraft industry nor her merchant fleet would be able to supply him (as Deputy and then as Commander of the RAF in the Middle East) with the necessary modern fighters, bombers and – not least – transport aircraft.

Consequently, he favoured an expedition mounted from Egypt early in 1941 to help Greece resist a German invasion, even though the British and Commonwealth forces faced certain defeat there and risked losing all the gains made in the Desert at Italian expense. As he later recalled in his memoirs, 'I knew how important it was that nothing should endanger the programmes for the supply of munitions, and particularly aircraft, plans which were being very actively drawn up, and which might fall through if the United States lost their faith in us'.[2]

Tedder went on to command Anglo-American air forces in the North Africa, Tunisia, Sicily and Italy. He became Deputy Supreme Commander to General Eisenhower for the Allied campaign that began in Normandy and ended in Berlin

Tedder went on to command Anglo-American air forces in the North Africa, Tunisia, Sicily and Italy. He became Deputy Supreme Commander to General Eisenhower for the Allied campaign that began in Normandy and ended in Berlin. After the war, promoted to five-star rank and elevated to the peerage as Lord Tedder, he was made Chief of the Air Staff and held this appointment for four critical years, 1946-1949, during most of which he was also Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff.

In 1950 he went, most reluctantly, to Washington DC to serve as Chairman of the British Joint Services Mission there and United Kingdom representative on the Standing Group of the military committee of NATO. He arrived just in time to find himself piggy-in-the-middle between American and British authorities, civilian as well as military, when the Korean war began. Escaping from Washington, he was elected Chancellor of Cambridge University (a distinction which, in his mind, ranked way above promotion to five-star rank); Vice-Chairman of the British Broadcasting Corporation's Board of Governors and Chairman of the Standard Motor Company (which underwent various transformations before submerging permanently). He was also connected, as they say, with the distilling and brewing industries.

All these are matters about which I'd like to talk to you some other time. For today, please allow me to conclude with one vital decision and three strokes of good fortune. Even the hardest stone needs a helping hand – from God, Fate or AMP – to rise to the top of the heap.

Tedder's vital decision came as early as September 1914. On the outbreak of the Great War, he immediately agitated for leave to return home to England from Fiji. When that appeal was rejected, he submitted his resignation. 'When one enters the Colonial Service', replied the governor on 4 September, 'one accepts certain duties and obligations in exactly the same way as when a man enters the Army; you are under orders and at times of stress one should stand by one's job and have no right to chuck it because one would prefer to take a part in the central area of disturbance. It may be hard to sit still and apparently take no part in the great events, but it is probably the higher patriotism'. Tedder rejected this sensible, persuasive appeal. It was the most decisive moment of his life and the riskiest. The war, remember, was widely expected to be over by Christmas and Tedder's prospects of a satisfactory career in some other profession, now that he was in his 25th year, were rapidly diminishing.

However, the war did not end by Christmas. Tedder was commissioned in January 1915 and the first of three exceptionally lucky breaks came when he twisted his knee. Had he not done so, it is likely that he would soon have been sent to the Western Front and there killed, as were so many other gallant young subalterns.

Having transferred to the Royal Flying Corps and learned to fly, Tedder joined 25 Squadron on the Western Front in June 1916. Almost at once, he enjoyed his second lucky break. On 21 June, he described the incident in a letter to his wife, Rosalinde. An anti-aircraft gun, he wrote, 'put a shrapnel bullet through the nacelle of my aircraft, in one side and out the other, cutting one of the petrol pipes and passing down between my legs. Petrol came pouring out in a continuous stream over my right foot'. Amazingly, flames did not appear and so a career that had barely begun did not end in agony.

Almost two years later, in May 1918, Tedder was en route by sea from Marseille to Alexandria when the third lucky break came. The ship was torpedoed, but it went down slowly with few casualties and Tedder was saved from a watery grave by a destroyer – of the Imperial Japanese Navy. It was a distinction, he later claimed, unmatched by any other senior British officer. Writing home to Rosalinde, he made an observation which you may wish to note. 'I have come to the conclusion', he told her, 'that if you are going to be torpedoed, it is best to do it at the end, rather than at the beginning of your journey, otherwise you don't get the full enjoyment of the rest of it!'

Once again, though, he had avoided an early death and in order to become a very senior officer, you do have to stay alive. And here we must say farewell to our hero, at least for today, on the deck of a Japanese destroyer. 'It was a brilliant starlit night', he told Rosalinde, 'and I could see the dim shapes of the other ships on one side of us. It was quite quiet. I have never known the dawn take so long to come!' But come it did and on he sailed to Egypt, a land where he would later earn a reputation that carried him on to greatness.

NOTES

1. Lord Moran, *Winston Churchill: The Struggle for Survival, 1940–1965* (Constable, London, 1966), pp. 50-51.
2. Lord Tedder, *With Prejudice* (Cassell, London, 1966), p. 32.

Presentation of Freedom of Croydon to Lord Tedder 26 September 1946. Lord Tedder inspects the Whitgift Guard of Honour