

## MONTY WAS MY DOUBLE

It was a difficult time in my life. Professionally, I had encountered some stumbling blocks in my career and – while at all times I had the support of my friends – there were serious difficulties in my marriage. And so it was decided at the highest level – after a series of confidential meetings of government officials and military top brass – that something needed to be done. After all, my life had reached a crucial stage. I needed to concentrate both on work and on my domestic situation but - as I believe the First Lord of the Admiralty said at one of the meetings, I simply could not be in two places at once. I could not, for example, attend a team-building weekend that coincided with my wedding anniversary. Nor would things go well if I were to bow out of a friend's 50<sup>th</sup> dinner party, claiming that I was required to work late at the office, and my wife was then seen to be texting a photograph of our dinner that same night.

No, the pressure was building up to an immense, even dangerous degree, at a crucial stage in my life, and it seemed – at first – that there was no solution to the problem. In what was to be the final meeting of the committee, the Home Secretary confessed that he could see no solution to the problem, while even MI6 could bring nothing to the table. In the end, as is so often the case, it was left to the Army to provide the answer. In a move which was both imaginative and daring – two words not necessarily associated with the brass hats of Whitehall – it was suggested that on certain occasions I should be replaced with, of all things, a “double”; someone with a strong physical resemblance to myself who could carry out my duties when I was required elsewhere. The load would thus be shared, and no one save a select few in the know would be any the wiser.

The idea was, apparently, not as new as it sounded. Various petty dictators had used doubles in a cowardly manner to reduce the problem of assassination – and even, it was claimed, the wife of the President of the United States - but it had never been applied in a country where truth and honesty were considered virtues. With this in mind, it has to be said that there were some dissenting voices, but when it was put to these men that there was simply no alternative, all opposition caved in, and the motion was carried unanimously.

There was then, naturally, a lot of talk about who the double would be. I am, like many men, both distinctive and anonymous in my appearance. I am of average height and build, with a face that is neither hideous nor alluring, and possess the same range and amount of distinguishing physical characteristics than any man does. All that remained now was to scour the nation looking for a suitable candidate. Naturally, some of the less desirable elements of society – criminals, agitators, alcoholics – would have to be excluded, but those people apart, the field was wide open. That said, even with the promise of reasonable remuneration coupled with the satisfaction of a job well done, it was clear to everyone at the meeting that filling the role of double would not be a simple task.

Until, out of the blue, a young secretary attached to the War Office cleared her throat and much to everyone's surprise, placed a pretty finger on my photograph and said, “Don't you think he looks like Field Marshal Montgomery?”

Silence swelled in the room. Then a junior minister said, “Good God, she's right.”

There was hubbub as everyone scraped back their chairs and crowded around the photograph.

“From a certain angle...” began the Home Secretary.

“Certain angle be damned!” said an Air Vice Marshall. “It's him to a tee.”

“How did we not notice before?” a Rear Admiral exclaimed, “Put a beret on him and it *is* Monty!”

Everyone turned to the silent figure at the head of the table who, with his usual flair for theatre, paused to relight his cigar before he spoke.

“Gentlemen,” said the Prime Minister, “I believe we have our double.”

Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery was not an easy man. His idiosyncratic leadership style and his contempt for bureaucracy – much like that of the Prime Minister – had made him at once both loved by the men under his command and loathed by anyone who preferred to do things by the book. But he was unquestioningly loyal to King and country and always knew instinctively when he was being asked to do the right thing by them. It must however have been a difficult day for Monty when he was approached by one of His Majesty’s equerries – the committee felt he would take the news better that way – and advised of his new appointment. However, he was not the hero of El Alamein for nothing, and within a few hours of being apprised of his mission, he declared himself ready for action.

At first very little happened. Telegrams were exchanged and telephone calls were made. I was asked to sign the Official Secrets Act and I must confess I did so with a slight pang – signing the Act set the seal on the fact that I would never be allowed to discuss with friends or family what was about to happen. Not that I could imagine such a thing happening. My pals would simply not have believed me, and as for my wife – even thinking about the pain the knowledge would cause her was hard. But I pulled myself together almost at once, thinking both of the sacrifices others were making on my behalf and the benefits that the operation would bring. How little I knew then.

I first met Monty a few weeks later in the wood-panelled conference room of some Whitehall ministry. He was dressed – not as I had foolishly imagined – in his family olive drab uniform and black Tanks beret – but in a neat Savile Row suit that somehow contrived to give off a military appearance, so well-turned out was the Field Marshal. I fear I did not make a good impression on him, because instead of returning my thanks, he merely turned to an aide and said, “So this is whom I’m to represent?” and turned to address a senior official.

I felt foolish and, if I am honest, shabby. I was suddenly aware of my old suit and scuffed shoes, my thinning hair and cheap tie. I have never been what my wife calls a snappy dresser – she once had to talk me out of buying some perfectly nice trainers in ShoeZone - and until now I had no cause to be ashamed of that fact. But Monty’s famous lack of tact had reduced me to red-faced mortification. I saw the expressions on the faces of several people in the room, even those hardened by years of military service, turn sympathetic and even angry, and I felt better for their kind reactions.

“Well,” said Monty, unaware of the awkwardness he had already created, “Shall we get on with it?”

The next few weeks were, I was shamefacedly pleased to note, difficult for Monty. A soldier and a leader, he was not accustomed to being told what to do – and what he was being told to do would strain the patience of a saint and the talents of a Gielgud. He was being asked, effectively, to *become* me, to learn my gestures, my mannerisms, my voice and even – and this was the part that galled him – my opinions and attitudes.

“But I don’t care if Greene is better than Waugh!” I once heard him exclaim petulantly. “They’re both a pair of nancy boys!”

And he would be taken aside for a little chat.

“The Manchester Guardian? The editor should be taken out and shot!”

Again the little chat.

“I refuse to use a mobile telephone! They kill both conversation and brain cells!”

And so on. It was a slow and disagreeable process for all concerned. Sometimes I could see ministers and generals standing in a corner, looking at us both, seeing Monty try

and turn his parade ground strut into something approaching my hesitant gait, and shaking their heads. I knew some members of the committee – Attlee, Cripps – were beginning to question the usefulness of the entire operation. I did not blame them: surely there were simpler measures? But these were exceptional circumstances (although in what way they were exceptional I could not recall) and the simplest solution was not always the available one.

Finally, it was announced that we were ready. The Field Marshal and I were summoned into the committee room. Monty was fully “done up” as me for the first time and I must admit that the resemblance took my breath away. It was like looking into a mirror – except that the reflection in that mirror looked back at one with disdain and a measure of contempt.

Certainly the Prime Minister agreed with me when he was brought into to see us both standing together.

“Excellent, gentlemen,” he told those assembled, “Just wipe that sneer off his face and we’ll be fine.”

I think it was that moment which sealed forever the animosity Field Marshal Montgomery felt for me.

And so Operation Viper – for so it had been christened – began. That night, I was slated to attend both a school reunion and a Christmas works drink. Before, it would have been impossible to go to both events, but now it was a simple matter of choosing which I would be present at and which Monty would attend. A flip of a coin decided it. I would go to the Christmas drink, while Monty would attend the reunion. There was the matter of my wife to consider, as she too would be at the reunion (partners were also invited and so there was nothing we could do to prevent her). I was made nervous by this, but was reassured to be told that two SAS operatives in mufti would also be tagging along to make sure things went smoothly.

The Christmas drink was dull, but necessary. I was able to distribute cards to colleagues who previously I’d had no reason to speak to and acquire intelligence concerning the promotion of someone who had been blocking my career path, information that enabled me to set in motion a chain of events which led to me taking over that person’s department. I managed to avoid the endless rounds and refills that made my colleagues more loquacious and less cautious (as well as a terrifying sprig of mistletoe) and returned home sober - only to find that nobody was at the house, the reunion still being in full swing.

As we had arranged for such a situation, I simply stayed in the car, drank a small amount of gin to give my wife the impression I’d had a night out, and waited until a minicab drew up and Monty and my wife got out. My wife opened the front door and then Monty, as me, shouted, “I’ve left my wallet in the cab!” and ran back down the street. I immediately took his place, like a runner in a relay, and walked back to the house.

“Had it on me all the time,” I told her.

“You’d forget your head if it wasn’t screwed on,” she said.

“No,” I replied, “I said I had it all the time.”

“I’m going to bed,” said my wife.

I felt the evening hadn’t entirely been a success, which both relieved and pleased me. I am a man and only human, after all.

Adjustments were made. It was decided that things had been done the wrong way round, and that from now on Monty would be deployed in work-related situations, while I would, as it were, represent myself on dates and other events where my wife was present.

The new regime was adjudged a success, and plans were set in motion to regularise the process. Security was always the prime consideration, of course, and it was always a risk when Monty was placed in unfamiliar situations (he was a prim, almost priggish man and had to be physically restrained by MI6 operatives after accidentally watching ten minutes of Netflix). By and large, however, things went well, and if my colleagues sometimes wondered why a twitch came to my face when someone mentioned the Labour Party or women's rights, they said nothing. As for my marriage, it went from strength to strength. My wife was pleased with my increased attentiveness ("You were a bit weird that night," was all she said about the evening she had unwittingly spent with Field Marshal Montgomery) and I felt more relaxed in myself, not having to worry about work-related functions – after each of which Monty was fully debriefed. He had a soldier's mind for detail and was able to repeat even the dullest details of a briefing.

And then came Monty's finest hour. It was the end of summer, and the annual team-building weekend in the Cairngorms was upon us. After some consultation – it was a long weekend, and there was no way to place a mole in the team to keep a watchful eye on Monty – the go-ahead for him to attend was given. There would be, unknown to Monty, drone surveillance for outdoor events, but apart from this concession to the modern world, the Field Marshal would be an unsupported operative, working off his own bat and trusted not to go rogue. All of us were on tenterhooks as Monty left on the flight to Inverness that misty September morning. What if his cover was blown? What if he lost his temper with Dave from bought ledgers? If he refused to carry out his team leader's orders? There were so many risks to be considered: but all we could do was trust in the man who had bested the Afrika Korps.

Our fears were not realised. Monty returned on the Monday afternoon wreathed in smiles. He had, it seems, taken control of the occasion in his own inimitable way, become a team leader, and led his men through an endless series of survival and initiative tests. He had been both strict and popular, stern and likeable, and at the weekend, his team had cheered him. On returning to the office the next day, I found that my reputation had sky-rocketed. My line manager took me to one side and said that a promotion would be imminent.

That night a special meeting of the committee took place, at which champagne was drunk and cigars were lit.

It was the best day.

The next few weeks were the halcyon days. My improved situation at work – all down to Monty, the great strategist – meant not only that I was freed from the executive pressures that had so dogged me, but also that the much-touted promotion actually happened. And, where other men might find that a push up the ladder brought with it extra work and responsibilities – well, for me these matters were not my problem. Montgomery took care of these matters, enabling me to spend more time on my marriage. My wife soon came to remark frequently on my more relaxed demeanour and our relations returned to an intimacy that we had not enjoyed since our courtship.

So much so that one morning I found myself saying to my wife, "Caroline, I think we should have a holiday."

She gave me a queer look. It was a mixture, I now realise, of doubt and hope: doubt that such a thing would be a good idea, and hope that it might be.

"It's been a while," she finally said, caution in her voice.

"It certainly has," I agreed.

The holiday was a great success. My wife and I rekindled much of the affection that our marriage had been lacking, and we were also able to relax, something I for one had been unable to do for some time.

On our last night, as we looked out over the bay and its glittering harbour lights, my wife said to me, “All this has been like a dream, hasn’t it?”

“Perhaps,” I said, “But it’s real.”

She sighed contentedly and pressed nearer to me.

“I only wish – “ she began.

“Wish what?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing,” she said, and then turned to me.

“I just wish you’d tell me the truth.”

I froze for a moment, and hoped she couldn’t feel me tensing up.

“The truth?” I repeated, hoping my voice sounded lighter than it felt. “Whatever can you mean?”

“Only that sometimes I feel you’re not entirely yourself with me,” she said. “Oh, I don’t mean that I think you’re having an affair, or anything like that.”

“Then what?” I asked, genuinely puzzled now.

She frowned. “It’s hard to explain,” she said. “Sometimes you come home and I ask you about your day and – you’re so *vague*. Almost as though you don’t even know how your day was. And other days you call me from work – “

“I do?” I asked.

“You know you do,” she said, amused at least, “And you’re so full of your work, and your plans, and the future. But then when you come home, you don’t seem even to remember calling me.”

Wheels began to turn in my mind. I wondered how to explain this. I realised I would have to alert the boffins. Yes, they would know what to do. They would –

“I saw you, you know,” said my wife. “In the park.” A small frown had appeared on her face.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You were in the park,” she repeated. “With your briefcase and your newspaper. Just sitting on a bench, looking at the trees.”

“I never go to the park,” I told her. “You must be mistaken.”

“I suppose so,” she said, but the frown did not disappear.

We flew home the next day, and I must admit to a certain relief. The conversation of our last night was not mentioned again, and life went on as it had done before. I continue to rise in my profession, and my home life does not seem any different; no better, no worse. Sometimes I think back to happier times, before the operation was conceived, then I remember: they were not happier times. My marriage, as I have said, was in serious difficulties, and my work situation was far from ideal. I look at my life and try to balance the scales, to see if where I was might have been a better place than where I am now. If the arrival of Field Marshal Montgomery in my life made any real difference not just to my situation but also to my happiness.

I wonder what “happiness” is.

I wonder if I am going mad.

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