

Michael E Haskew describes the career of the often-overlooked British Army officer who contributed mightily to the special relationship between Great Britain and the United States just at the time when the critical alliance was most needed.

Field Marshal



Sir John Dill

Champion of Co-operation in the Allied Cause

The encounter was intense... and indeed unpleasant. Field Marshal Sir John Dill, Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) and the highest-ranking officer in the British Army, had just emerged from another contentious meeting with Prime Minister Winston Churchill.

These were the dark days of 1940, with the war in its second year and Churchill had railed on the topic of the Middle East. "The prime minister lost his temper with me," Dill confided to another officer. "I could see the blood come up in his great neck and

his eyes began to flash. He said: 'What you need out there is a court martial and a firing squad.' I should have said, whom do you want to shoot exactly; but I did not think of it till afterwards."

The thoughtful Dill, a career army officer who had served in the Second Boer War, proven himself in combat during the Great War and held commands across the Empire, was 58 years old. A gifted and well-reputed trainer of troops, he was appointed to the Order of the Bath in 1928. His promotion to CIGS had come just as the BEF was evacuating the continent at Dunkirk following the disastrous defence of France against the Nazi onslaught that ended with the invaders goose-stepping down the Champs-Élysées in Paris. ▶

RIGHT: SNOW BLANKETS SIR JOHN DILL'S GRAVE AND STATUE IN ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY. (RACHEL LARUE/US ARMY/ARLINGTON NATIONAL CEMETERY)





Biography	
Name:	Field Marshal Sir John Greer Dill
Nickname:	'Dilly-Dally'
Born:	December 25, 1881, Lurgan, County Armagh, Northern Ireland
Died:	November 4, 1944, Washington, DC
Allegiance:	British Empire
Service/branch:	British Army
Battles/wars:	Second Boer War; The Great War: <i>Neuve Chapelle, Aubers Ridge, Arras, Cambrai</i> ; Arab Revolt in Palestine; Second World War
Awards:	GCB, CMG, DSO, US Distinguished Service Medal, Légion d'honneur (France), Croix de guerre (France), Ordre de la Couronne (Belgium), Order of Saint Olav (Norway), Order of Polonia Restituta (Poland), MID (eight times)



The Prime Minister Chafes

Churchill, the acknowledged man of the hour, had become prime minister amid the unfolding debacle, elevating Dill to CIGS as replacement for Field Marshal Edmund Ironside. The mercurial Churchill was energetic, passionate and inspiring; however, he was also petulant, demanding and quite willing to insert himself into military matters. From the beginning, the relationship between Churchill and Dill was strained. Providentially, however, such alchemy produced a most fortuitous arrangement – and with it moments of supreme greatness for a man many had considered “washed up”.

Intellectually equal or superior to most of his contemporaries, Dill preferred to present his views in well thought-out and

written memoranda. Churchill, though, preferred the man-to-man discussion that sometimes devolved into shouting and acrimony. When the two men tried to work together, their divergent approaches regularly led to dysfunction. Churchill believed Dill the embodiment of a War Office that was “hidebound, devoid of imagination, extravagant of manpower and slow”. Consequently, word filtered through the highest echelons of command that the CIGS was unequal to the task of standing up to Churchill.

Major-General Hastings Ismay, close advisor and chief of staff to the prime minister, observed that rather than substantive disagreement it was Dill’s general attitude that irked Churchill, who complained that the CIGS was “too cautious if not actually slow, too pessimistic and too apt to make difficulties, too inclined to compromise and overall a tired man”.

Cigs and Sensibility

At the same time, the military situation remained bleak in many respects. Dill was saddled with tremendous responsibility



ABOVE: DILL ARRIVES AT DOWNING STREET FOR A CABINET MEETING TO DISCUSS BELGIUM’S SURRENDER. (TOPFOTO)

CENTRE: PRIME MINISTER CHURCHILL WITH THE THREE SENIOR SERVICE OFFICERS, DILL, ADM SIR DUDLEY POUND AND AM SIR WILFRED FREEMAN, AUGUST 1941. (TOPFOTO)

OPPOSITE: DILL AS A CAPTAIN, 1914. (TOPFOTO)

during perhaps the most desperate threat to Britain's survival since the Spanish Armada in 1588. Resources were paltry when compared to global demands for military defence.

Dill approved a request to send 150 tanks to North Africa, even though every available asset was needed to defend Britain from invasion. The dividend was a series of stunning victories against the Italians, but also the hastening of a German expeditionary force, the Afrika Korps under General Erwin Rommel, to the western desert.

While Dill may well be credited with curbing some of Churchill's more reckless military ventures, he supported the ill-fated reinforcement of Greek forces at the expense of operations in North Africa and the appointment of General Arthur Percival to command at Singapore, which subsequently surrendered to the Japanese with 80,000 Commonwealth troops taken prisoner.

Dill's most controversial proposal as CIGS involved the use of poison gas, banned by the 1925 Geneva Protocol, as a defence

against invasion. Although he was aware that the use of chemical agents would bring condemnation from other nations, Dill was pragmatic in the suggestion. "At a time when our national existence is at stake, when we are threatened by an implacable enemy who himself recognises no rules save those of expediency, we should not hesitate to adopt whatever means appear to offer the best chances of success," Dill wrote in 1940.

Churchill and other high-ranking officers actually agreed with the idea and contingency plans were made to deploy mustard gas. Still, the proposal met with opposition within the military establishment. Concerns of German retaliation and the impact on civilian morale compelled Dill to withdraw his proposal.

Chiefs and Charter

In August 1941, Dill accompanied Churchill to Placentia Bay, Newfoundland, to attend the conference with President Franklin D Roosevelt that produced the Atlantic Charter, a joint statement of understanding regarding wartime goals and post-war vision. Although the United States was not yet officially a belligerent, American support for Britain had been demonstrated through Lend-Lease and other considerations. Churchill came to describe the shared purpose of the United States and Great Britain as a "special relationship".

While attending the conference, Dill met General George C Marshall, US Army Chief of Staff and close advisor to Roosevelt. Their initial discussions were a bit bumpy due to administrative difficulties, but the two men got along well and the basis of a lasting personal friendship was formed.

By the end of 1941, however, the persistent difficulties between Churchill and Dill reached a crescendo. The prime minister referred derisively to the CIGS as 'Dilly-Dally', and the two were never able to form a positive personal relationship. Rumours circulated that Dill's health was deteriorating. Despite being described by another officer as one who "allied a quick mind to a quiet manner, concealing a strong will", Dill's days as CIGS were numbered. In early December, he announced his retirement from the post. Churchill salved his wounds with a promotion to field marshal and an appointment as governor-designate of Bombay.

Dill's successor as CIGS was his long-time friend, protégé and high-riser, General Alan Brooke. More to Churchill's liking, he said of Brooke: "When I thump the table and push my face towards him what does he do? Thumps the table harder and glares back at me..."

Before Dill could take up his field marshal's baton en route to exile in India, Japanese forces attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, plunging the United States headlong



into the global conflict. Churchill requested an urgent meeting with Roosevelt in Washington DC, to discuss common strategic initiatives. Brooke remembered that Dill had met Marshall at Placentia Bay and noted how well the two men got along. He visited Churchill at 10 Downing Street and in a 30-minute meeting persuaded the prime minister to allow Dill to accompany him to Washington.

Brooke's persuasive effort was a turning point. He remembered the dialogue with Churchill as "one of the most important accomplishments during the war, or at any rate amongst those that bore most fruit". Field Marshal Sir John Dill set off for America on December 12, 1941, and so narrowly avoiding relegation to the backwaters of war, rendered his greatest service to Britain and the United States in the twilight of a long military career.

An Ulster Man in Uniform

John Greer Dill was born on Christmas Day, 1881 in Lurgan, County Armagh in present-day Northern Ireland. His father was the local manager of the Ulster Bank and the boy became acquainted with tragedy at age 12 when his parents died only months apart. The Reverend Joseph G Burton, an uncle and clergyman of the Church of Ireland, took in young John and his older sister, Nina.

After an education at Methodist College, Belfast and Cheltenham College, Gloucestershire – where his military ambitions were fostered – Dill graduated from the Royal Military College at Sandhurst. On May 8, 1901 he received ►

*"When I thump the table
and push my face towards
him what does he do?
Thumps the table harder
and glares back at me..."*



a second lieutenant's commission in the 1st Battalion, Leinster Regiment.

"I was not able to get a [Northern] Irish regiment, a Scotch-Irish regiment," he remembered years later. "There was not one vacancy for me because the [Second] Boer War was on. They said, 'You will have to wait.' I could not wait. I said, 'Give me a Southern Irish regiment,' the next best thing, I thought, so they put me to a South Irish regiment, the Leinsters, from the middle of Kings County... It was a serious thing for a Black Northerner [an occasionally derogatory term originally referring to Irishmen with foreign ancestry, but became descriptive: dark hair, dark eyes] like me to be thrown among a lot of gossoons [lackeys] from Kings County, but we mixed, we got to love each other in an extraordinary way..."

The young officer's service was recognised with a Queen's Medal and five clasps along with a glowing report. "We feel we cannot let the opportunity pass without saying a few words about the excellent work performed by Lieutenant Dill during his adjutancy," read one narrative. Dill gained a reputation as an outstanding trainer of soldiers. While serving with the Leinster

Regiment, Dill married Ada Maud, daughter of a retired army officer, in Fermoy, County Cork in 1907. By all accounts, the marriage was unhappy. Ada was prone to depression and frequently self-medicated. After a series of strokes, she died on December 23, 1940 while John was enduring the difficult end of his CIGS term and two days before his 59th birthday. The couple had one son, John, born in 1916, who maintained a close relationship with his father despite extended periods of separation. Ten months after Ada's death, Dill married a second time. His union with Nancy Furlong was considerably more joyful.

"We feel we cannot let the opportunity pass without saying a few words about the excellent work performed by Lieutenant Dill."

After the Second Boer War, promotion was painfully slow. Advanced to the rank of captain in 1911, Dill entered Staff College, Camberley in 1913 and was bluntly told along with his classmates that they were studying for an approaching conflict. His term at the Staff College and subsequent service in the Great War shaped the future for Dill, who rose to prominence. By the end of the war, he had risen to brigadier, serving on the staff of Field Marshal Douglas Haig, commander of the BEF.

Staff Prominence

During the Great War, Dill served as brigade major of the 25th Brigade, 8th Division, experiencing combat at Neuve Chapelle and Aubers Ridge. He was wounded, mentioned in dispatches eight times and received the Distinguished Service Order. He served as a staff officer to the Canadian Corps and with the 37th Division, again seeing action at Ypres and Arras. As a brigadier, his service in operations was praised.

Noted historian Captain B H Liddell Hart related that in the wake of the major German Spring Offensive of March 1918, Dill "proved the pivotal man in Haig's staff,



showing a clearer and cooler grasp of the situation than the two above him in the General Staff ladder. His influence on the planning of the British offensive in the summer and autumn of 1918 had been no less important.”

Days of Disappointment

Having burnished his reputation, Dill spent the interwar years in several posts, including tenure as an instructor and then as commandant of the Staff College and with the Imperial Defence College. He was briefly posted to India. During the autumn of 1931, he suffered serious injuries in a fall from a horse during an equestrian drag hunt. He spent two months in hospital and the physical setback is believed to have negatively impacted his candidacy for CIGS in 1937, though in that year he was knighted. The appointment for CIGS went to Lord Gort, five years his junior, while Dill was serving as Director of Military Operations and Intelligence.

Frankly, Secretary of State for War Leslie Hore-Belisha disliked Dill, who seemed preoccupied with personal financial concerns. Gort observed, “Hore-Belisha didn’t like Dill because he hadn’t agreed with him.” Liddell Hart advised Hore-Belisha that Dill had “gone off”, perhaps due to his earlier injuries, another fall from horseback and a further decline in general health. In 1936, Dill was appointed to command British forces in Palestine during the lengthy Arab Revolt. British troop strength swelled to 20,000 and Dill returned to Britain the following year to become the senior officer commanding



at Aldershot Command, home of the British Army.

In 1939, Dill aspired to command the BEF dispatched to France; however, the post again went to Gort. Ironside was named to the CIGS vacancy. Disappointed, Dill was given command of I Corps in September and promoted to full general in October. He commanded the corps

until April 1940, returning to Britain a month prior to the German offensive that conquered France. He never led the corps in battle.

When Dill returned, he was appointed Vice-chief of the Imperial General Staff. Churchill succeeded Neville Chamberlain on May 10, 1940 and 17 days later Dill replaced Ironside as CIGS.

Charter and Challenge

Even as the relationship between Churchill and Dill soured, *MacLean's*, Canada’s national magazine, lauded the CIGS in its April 15, 1941 edition. “In himself he gives you first and foremost the impression of a man who thoroughly knows a job for which he has been preparing for years and years and in which he is quite at home,” the story reads. “He is a scientific soldier in the best sense of the term – as scientific as any German, with the technique of modern war at his finger ends. Yet though he knows all about guns and tanks and aircraft, he never forgets that these things are handled by men and that men are more important than weapons. So long as he is at the helm the British Army will never be a soulless machine.” ▶



ABOVE: DILL, ANTHONY EDEN AND CLEMENT ATTLEE LEAVING 10 DOWNING STREET, MAY 27, 1940. (TOPFOTO)

LEFT: THE BIG THREE AT THE CAIRO CONFERENCE, WITH DILL STOOD BEHIND AND LEFT OF STALIN. (TOPFOTO)

OPPOSITE: DILL, AS GOC 1ST CORPS, WITH STAFF. (TOPFOTO)

FAR RIGHT: OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH SHOWING DILL, AS GOC 1ST CORPS, VISITING BEF POSITIONS AT FLINES, FRANCE.

BOTTOM RIGHT: DILL, WITH ANTHONY EDEN, ADM SIR ANDREW CUNNINGHAM, ACM SIR ARTHUR LONGMORE, AND GEN SIR ARCHIBALD WAVELL, FEBRUARY 19, 1941 (TOPFOTO)

BOTTOM: US ARMY CHIEF OF STAFF, GENERAL GEORGE C MARSHALL, IN 1947. (DUTCH NATIONAL ARCHIVES)

Still, Churchill's lack of confidence in Dill was notable even as they sailed to Placentia Bay aboard HMS *Prince of Wales*. Although the first meeting between Dill and Marshall was merely a footnote among the larger cooperative discussions during the Atlantic Conference, its impact proved far-reaching. When Dill returned to London, he wrote to Marshall, "I sincerely hope that we shall meet again before long. In the meantime we must keep each other in touch in the frank manner upon which we agreed."

Marshall replied: "I propose writing to you personally and very frankly whenever any matters arise which I think merit such attention. I am depending on you to treat me with similar frankness, and I am quite sure you will do so."

With Dill's appointment as head of the British Joint Staff Mission in Washington and subsequently as senior British representative to the Combined Chiefs of Staff, a special relationship that on a day-to-day basis carried greater weight than that of Churchill and Roosevelt came to full flower. Dill reached his career zenith as he applied forthright and practical diplomacy with the Americans, effectively serving as Britain's military ambassador. No doubt, he realised the industrial might and manpower of the United States were vital, war-winning elements in the partnership and that Britain was dependent upon these resources – a dependency that was magnified as the war progressed. For the Americans, a level of trust in Dill transcended their impression of Churchill, whom they considered somewhat duplicitous, willing to withhold information, a military schemer at times. Dill was without veneer, transparent and reliable.

Marshall dealt with Roosevelt's penchant to withhold information even from his closest advisors, unwilling to fully share

intelligence and strategic perspective. The chief of staff once admitted that the president did not "give us the messages he was sending half the time". In the spirit of co-operation, Dill provided Marshall with correspondence between Roosevelt and Churchill, while Marshall was willing to provide Dill with information that influenced Britain's wartime conduct. Through mutual trust, the two officers overcame differences that might have strained the Anglo-American alliance to breaking point. Dill did, in fact, risk the alienation of his countrymen by siding with the Americans when he believed the position best for the war effort.

During the Casablanca Conference in January 1943, Dill was largely responsible for brokering a compromise that led to the allied invasion of Sicily rather than a cross-Channel invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe. Brooke observed: "I owe him an unbounded debt of gratitude for his help on that occasion and in many other similar ones." As the Combined Chiefs of Staff grappled with a comprehensive strategic policy to defeat the Axis in Europe and the Pacific, Marshall suggested that operations against Japan should be conducted regularly with resources available in the theatre. Brooke despaired and still believed that an agreement was out of reach in the context of a "Germany first" policy.

Dill inquired of Brooke just how far he might move to achieve a compromise and received the cold response, "Not an inch!" Dill responded forcefully: "Oh yes, you will. You know that you must come to some agreement with the Americans and that you cannot bring the unsolved problem up to the prime minister and the president. You know as well as I do what a mess they would make of it."

A fixture at the conferences in which major allied strategic decisions were hammered out, Dill travelled to Casablanca, Quebec, Cairo and Tehran and to meetings in India, Brazil and China in 1943 alone. He served on the combined policy committee established at Quebec for the administration of the research and development of the atomic bomb and he contributed to the planning for the United Nations.

In 1957, Marshall told biographer Forrest Pogue that throughout their association Dill "not only had remarkable character, but he had been even more remarkable in carrying out his duties... His opinions of affairs for quite a while didn't jibe with those of Mr Churchill and some of the others and that made it a rather delicate business, but he talked with extreme frankness."

Dill served brilliantly, maintaining the confidence of his American Allies and the faith of his British colleagues. However, the strain of the post he occupied exacerbated a dire health condition that was diagnosed





“...the most important figure in the remarkable accord which has been developed in the combined operations of our two countries”

President Roosevelt on Dill

Four days after his death, Dill was memorialised with a funeral service at the Washington National Cathedral. The Combined Chiefs of Staff served as honorary pallbearers and the flags in the US capital flew at half-staff. Marshall delivered the scripture lesson and Dr Foster Kennedy, Dill's cousin, recalled: “I have never seen so many men so visibly shaken by sadness. Marshall's face was truly stricken... It was a remarkable and noble affair.”

Although Dill's contribution to victory has remained largely in the shadow of other momentous events, Brooke lamented:

“Few men did more in furthering our cause of final victory than Dill.” The field marshal was awarded the US Distinguished Service Medal and acclaimed with a joint resolution of Congress. In 1950, he was further honoured with the dedication of a magnificent equestrian statue at Arlington, one of only two in the entire cemetery (the other is of Civil War General Phil Kearney).

His friend Marshall spoke once again, as did President Harry Truman. It was a suitable coda to the memory of a man most fit for the critical role Sir John Dill played in a world at war. ●

as aplastic anaemia in the summer of 1944. Although some historians believe that the disease had contributed to his earlier career setbacks, others assert that it had little impact until Dill's health had deteriorated beyond hope for recovery. The artful diplomat and military man died quietly at Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington DC on November 4, 1944.

The Joint Chiefs were shaken, and none more so than Marshall, who made arrangements for the unprecedented burial of a foreign soldier at Arlington National Cemetery, the shrine to America's dead heroes. Marshall wrote to Dill's widow, “I know that it is not necessary for me to tell you of my distress of mind at this moment. Officially the United States has suffered a heavy loss, and I personally have lost a dear friend, unique in my lifetime, and never to be out of my mind.”

President Roosevelt called Dill “...the most important figure in the remarkable accord which has been developed in the combined operations of our two countries”.

