

C. Currie, saluted Patton “dazzling in his smart gabardines,” and is reported to have said, “General, it was a jolly good race. I congratulate you.” The film *Patton* gives a completely false version of this event. Monty himself is depicted leading a British column into Messina, only to be greeted by Patton with a smirk on his face, having beaten his arch-rival into the city.

Although Husky was successful, there is no doubt that bungling and lack of direction and coordination by both Eisenhower’s and Alexander’s headquarters allowed 40,000 Germans, 60,000 Italians and some 10,000 vehicles, including 47 tanks, to escape in a skilfully executed withdrawal across the Straits of Messina. Admittedly, the Axis forces had suffered 160,000 casualties, of which 140,000 were prisoners, but the cost to the Allies had been heavy—12,843 British Commonwealth casualties and 8,781 Americans. These figures can be doubled if one takes into account those who were evacuated with malaria. Monty blamed higher command for the failure to stop or at least heavily interfere with the Axis withdrawal.

As early as August 7, having seen the latest Royal Air Force reconnaissance reports and aware that the Etna Line had finally been broken by his XXX Corps, he noted, “There has been heavy traffic all day across the Straits of Messina and the enemy is without doubt starting to get his stuff away. I have tried hard to find out what the combined Navy-Air plan is in order to stop him getting away; I have been unable to find out. I fear the truth is that there is NO plan ... The trouble is there is no high-up grip on this campaign ... It beats me how anyone thinks you can run a campaign ... with the three Commanders of the three Services about 600 miles from each other.”

Surprisingly, Monty did not include Ike in his criticism. It was after all the latter’s responsibility to coordinate the activities of his service commanders. Eisenhower finally did so on August 9, but even after that there was still no coherent interdiction plan and Monty could do nothing other than to watch the enemy escape and his rival claim the limelight. □

Retired Maj. Gen. Michael Reynolds is a graduate of the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. He served in the British Army around the world and was seriously wounded during the Korean War. He is the former director of NATO’s Military Plans and Policy Division and the author of four well-received books.

owners of the gold could not be ascertained, large amounts of the gold train booty were shipped to the United States for auction. The first shipment of merchandise arrived in New York in December 1947, under the direction of the Advisory Liquidation Committee, and was auctioned in June 1948, at the Parke-Bernet Galleries. Roughly \$4 million in valuables was put up for auction.

In December 1949, over a thousand paintings were transferred to the custody of the government of Austria. In a change of direction by the American government, a March 26, 1952, State Department document titled *Confidential Security Information: Hungarian Cultural Property in U.S. Custody*, said in part that it would “... propose that all cultural property of Hungarian ownership will be held indefinitely for eventual return to the rightful owners and that this fact should be broadcast to Hungary.”

The strange case of the Hungarian gold train lingered well after the end of World War II. Wilhelm Hottl turned himself in to U.S. 3rd Army personnel along with six of his men. The Army’s Counterintelligence Corps issued a most wanted list with the name of Arpad Toldi right at the top for the crime of “destruction of Hungarian Jewry.” Toldi, aware that he was a wanted man, made contact with a French Army officer named Colonel Henri Jung and told him a bogus story that he was ordered to “protect” the gold train from the Soviets. He provided Jung with the locations of various sites in the French zone that contained portions of the gold train loot. Toldi decided it was in his best interest not to reveal his secret deal with Friedrich Westen and Wilhelm Hottl. Toldi was finally arrested in August 1945, and released from confinement that November with no charges being filed.

In October 1999, the United States government released its findings on the gold train incident as part of its investigation into the role of the Swiss government during the war. The U.S. report’s ending paragraph sums up the case in spades. “In the end, there may be no single explanation of why the property of the Hungarian Jewish community was so readily dispersed. But the fact remains that the application of several policies to the various assets aboard the Gold Train assured that the property was never returned to its rightful owners.” □

Peter Kross is the author of The Encyclopedia of World War 2 Spies. He resides in New Jersey.

ship.” The unassuming Arkansan was stunned and wept when the admiral told him of the tribute the *Marblehead* sailors had paid to him.

Wassell became a national hero when his exploits were revealed in a radio broadcast by President Roosevelt on April 28, 1942. In one of his widely heard “fireside chats,” FDR announced, “... The men were suffering severely, but Doctor Wassell kept them alive by his skill and inspired them by his own courage. As the official report said, Wassell was ‘almost like a Christ-like shepherd devoted to his flock.’”

Returning to the United States, the gallant doctor served at the San Pedro navy base in California until June 1944, when he became the assistant navy public relations director for the West Coast. He was promoted to captain in July 1943. That year, his inspiring story was told in a biography by James Hilton, British author of the classic novels *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* and *Lost Horizon*. More fame was to follow, for Hollywood director-producer Cecil B. DeMille, who had heard Roosevelt’s broadcast, decided that here was a worthy subject for a major motion picture.

On a memorable night in April 1944, the former country doctor and medical missionary went to Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C., for the premiere of DeMille’s *The Story of Dr. Wassell*. The epic, 140-minute film starred Gary Cooper in the title role, which was one of his most sensitive performances, supported by Laraine Day, Dennis O’Keefe, Signe Hasso, Paul Kelly, and Philip Ahn.

Wassell was detached to the naval training center in Miami, Fl., until August 1946, when he retired with the rank of rear admiral. The following year, he and his wife resumed their medical missionary work, joining the staff of the Shingle Memorial Hospital, an Episcopal mission on the Hawaiian island of Molokai. The couple worked without pay. They left the hospital in December 1947, however, because the famed doctor said it “is being run as a commercial public institution and not as a missionary institution.”

After living in Florida for a time, the Wassells returned to Little Rock in 1956. The Navy Cross hero died there on May 12, 1958, at the age of 73, and was buried in Arlington National Cemetery. □

Michael D. Hull is a frequent contributor to WWII History. He resides in Enfield, Conn.